

**An Analysis of the Production, Content, Distribution, and Reception of
Karunamayudu (1978), an Indian Jesus Film**

Dwight H. Friesen

PhD

University of Edinburgh

2009

I hereby declare that this thesis constitutes my personal research conducted at the University of Edinburgh and United Theological College, Bangalore. All sources used in the thesis are cited in accordance with University of Edinburgh guidelines.

Dwight Friesen
September 2009

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research project was made possible through the generous support of many.

Dr David Shepherd introduced me to *Karunamayudu*, pointed me to the University of Edinburgh, and invited me to the conversation on film and theology. Dr Jolyon Mitchell demonstrated inestimable patience and generous ruthlessness in guiding me to the finish line. Prof Duncan Forrester's timely encouragement and love for India and her people underlined my conviction to persevere.

The student exchange program between New College, University of Edinburgh, and United Theological College (UTC), Bangalore, made it possible to peruse resources unavailable in Edinburgh. The opportunities afforded to interact with faculty and students at UTC cannot be acknowledged fully here. Dr Joshva Raja, Dr Kieran Sebastien, and Dr Sham P. Thomas deserve special note for their instructive input and affirmation. The faculty, staff, and students at the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society, Bangalore, also extended hospitality, access to resources, and critical feedback without which this project would have been much the poorer.

Barring the support and candour of the leadership of Dayspring International, Dayspring Enterprises (India), and Operation Mobilization (India), this study could not have been as comprehensive in scope. John Gilman, Kieran Varghese, JeyaPaul, and associates opened their archives and lives to scrutiny without reserve. The same must be said for Vijay Chander, Fr Christopher Coelho (1932-2007), and members past and present of Amruthavani in Secunderabad, India.

Without the vision of Dr Howard Dowdell (1926-2009) whose mandate for the Canadian Centre for World Mission (CCWM) included the support of Canadian contributions to critical scholarship in related fields, this project might never have

commenced. Those who supported this research via CCWM and sustained us through so many other timely acts of friendship and familial empathy will be acknowledged privately, unfettered by the due restrictions of space and formality.

For camaraderie and shared journeys, thanks to the student community at Blacket Avenue, and especially to Darren and Elisabeth Kennedy and boys for brightening the path ahead of us. Amy Richards, Milja Radovich, Yam Chi-Keung, and Alina Birzache, may your tribe increase. For helping make Edinburgh home, thanks to Malcolm and Valerie McKitterick. For laughter, coffee, and a listening ear on this journey: Jonathan Roper, Eric Robertson, John Lloyd, Merlin Bartel, Dr Robert Seale, Paul Edward Ralph, Kent Dueck, Dr Jeromey Martini and Bruce Thiessen. Deb Elkind, thanks for your keen eyes. The faults are all mine.

To Sancia, Joel, and Caitlin: thank you for sharing this journey. I trust that the returns on this investment for you will be multiple, life giving, and enduring. 'Cheeerrs'. Dad.

To my dear wife, Denise: this one is for you. Thank you for your unflagging support and for reminding me in timely ways that this is *our* journey and not just mine. Many thanks for your prayers among the wildflowers. May your path grow ever greener.

Above all to Christ who 'plays in ten thousand places' and 'to the Father through the features of men's faces' (G.M. Hopkins), Thank You.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FIGURES	xi
ABSTRACT	xii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
 CHAPTER ONE: A Literature Review.....	4
1. Introduction.....	4
2. Film, religion, and theology.....	4
2.1 Historical Background.....	6
2.2 Changing criteria.....	8
2.3 Formative trajectories.....	10
2.4 Expanding the field	17
2.4.1 Redefining religion	18
2.4.2 Beyond Eurocentrism.....	21
2.4.3 Beyond literary analysis.....	24
2.4.4 Toward a theologically informed film history	26
3. Jesus in Film.....	27
4. Religion in Indian Cinema	35
5. Conclusion	38
 CHAPTER TWO: Methodology	40
1. Introduction.....	40
2. Development of the research questions	41

2.1 Personal background	41
2.2 Narrowing the question	44
3. Research objectives	48
4. Methodological matters	49
4.1 Definitions of terms.....	50
4.2 What this project is not about	52
4.3 Anthropological influences.....	53
4.4 Instructive case studies	57
4.5 Defining outcomes	59
4.6 Methodological Challenges	60
5. Approaches Employed.....	61
5.1 Analyzing production (chapter 3)	62
5.2 Analyzing context (chapter 4).....	63
5.3 Analyzing content (chapter 5).....	63
5.4 Analyzing distribution and exhibition (chapter 6)	64
5.5 Analyzing reception (chapter 7).....	65
6. Constraints	67
7. Ethical Considerations	67
8. Significance of research	68
8.1 Historical significance	69
8.2 Theoretical significance.....	69
9. Conclusion	70
CHAPTER THREE: A Cinematic Jesus for India:	
The Production of <i>Karunamayudu</i>	71
1. Introduction	71

2. Production History and Analysis.....	73
2.1 Stage one – <i>Raraju Kristu</i> (c.1974-1976).....	74
2.2 Stage two - <i>Karunamayudu</i> (1976-1978).....	87
3. Conclusion	98
 CHAPTER FOUR: Indian cinema as context for <i>Karunamayudu</i>	99
1. Introduction	99
2. Defining Indian Cinema.....	100
3. Religion and Indian Cinema.....	102
4. Characteristics of Indian cinema	105
4.1 The interplay of local and global: D.G. Phalke – A case study.....	106
4.2 Hybridity.....	109
4.3 A site of Integration.....	113
5. Cultural Context	115
6. The significance of <i>Karunamayudu</i> as an Indian film.....	118
6.1 The significance of Indian cinema for Fr. Christopher Coelho	119
6.2 The significance of Indian cinema for Vijay Chander	123
7. Conclusion	126
 CHAPTER FIVE: The content of <i>Karunamayudu</i> : A Hybrid Jesus.....	128
1. Introduction	128
2. Versions of <i>Karunamayudu</i>	128
3. Synopsis	129
4. Original screenplays vs. the final cut.....	130
5. <i>Karunamayudu</i> as a devotional film.....	134
6. The Indianness of <i>Karunamayudu</i>	137

6.1 The film's title	138
6.2 Local actors.....	139
6.3 Music, songs and dances	140
6.4 Narrative style.....	142
6.5 Flashbacks.....	143
6.6 Cinematic allusions	144
6.7 Emotion	146
6.8 Framing.....	147
6.9 Duration.....	148
7. <i>Karunamayudu</i> : the hybrid Jesus	149
8. Conclusion	153
 CHAPTER SIX: The Distribution and Exhibition of <i>Karunamayudu</i>	155
1. Introduction	155
2. From commercial to non-commercial cinema	155
3. The distribution and exhibition of <i>Karunamayudu</i>	158
3.1 What John Gilman saw in <i>Karunamayudu</i>	158
3.2 Showing <i>Karunamayudu</i> : strategies for distribution and exhibition.....	162
3.3 Showing <i>Karunamayudu</i> : assumptions and motivations	165
3.3.1 Gilman's foundational assumptions	166
3.3.2 Gilman's assumptions: a review	170
3.4 Showing <i>Karunamayudu</i> : assumptions and implications	175
4. What exhibitors have seen in <i>Karunamayudu</i>	179
4.1 Identifying exhibitors	180
4.2 <i>Karunamayudu</i> in the life of an exhibition team	181
4.3 Exhibitors' perceptions of <i>Karunamayudu</i>	185

4.3.1 <i>Karunamayudu</i> as culturally relevant	188
4.3.2 <i>Karunamayudu</i> as inadequate	189
5. Conclusion	192
 CHAPTER SEVEN: A reception analysis of <i>Karunamayudu</i>	194
1. Introduction	194
2. <i>Karunamayudu</i> 's initial reception: two conversations.....	195
3. Watching <i>Karunamayudu</i> : case studies in reception.....	202
3.1 Site A: A tribal village in Andhra Pradesh	203
3.2 Site B: A town in Karnataka	204
3.3 Site C: An urban slum in South India	207
4. Reflections	209
5. Exhibitors on the reception of <i>Karunamayudu</i>	211
5.1 Common responses	212
5.2 Village vs. city viewers	218
5.3 Religions and reception	219
5.4 Jesus and other gods.....	220
6. Conclusion	221
 CHAPTER EIGHT: Implications.....	223
1. Introduction	223
2. Review	223
3. Implications for the study of film, religion, and theology	224
3.1 Production.....	225
3.2 Content	227
3.3 Distribution and Exhibition	229
3.4 Reception	230

4. Implications for the study of Jesus films	234
5. Implications for the study of religion in Indian cinema.....	238
6. Implications for understanding developments in Indian Christology.....	240
6.1 <i>Karunamayudu</i> : an introduction to Indian Christology	240
6.2 Parallels between <i>Karunamayudu</i> 's history and Indian Christian theology.....	241
6.3 <i>Karunamayudu</i> : visualizing Jesus as guru.....	244
7. Contingencies	250
8. Covenants with images / covenants with films	253
9. Conclusion	256
 APPENDIX A	 258
SOURCES CONSULTED.....	260
FILMOGRAPHY	286

FIGURES

Figure 1 – Sacred heart poster.....	86
Figure 2 – Christopher Coelho and Vijay Chander	86
Figure 3 – <i>Karunamoorthi</i> advert	93
Figure 4 – Screenshots.....	146
Figure 5 – John Gilman with <i>Karunamayudu</i> hoarding	162

ABSTRACT

An Analysis of the Production, Content, Distribution and Reception of *Karunamayudu* (1978), an Indian Jesus Film

In this study I analyse the thirty-year journey of *Karunamayudu* (1978), an Indian Jesus film, from its production to its recent reception. Drawing on a combination of historical and empirical data I explore questions such as: What religious traditions and experiences have informed *Karunamayudu's* production, content, distribution and reception? How has this film been appropriated by distributors, producers, and viewers? And how does such an understanding of the history of *Karunamayudu* (1978), arguably India's best-known Jesus film, contribute to our understanding of the tangled relationship between film, religion, and theology?

In the first chapter I demonstrate how this study contributes to gaps in the existing scholarship on film, religion, and theology, Jesus in film, and religion in Indian cinema. In the second chapter I provide a rationale for the methodologies I employed. The third and fourth chapters address the production history and context of the film, and the fifth is a review of the film itself. In chapters six and seven I discuss the distribution and reception of the film, respectively, and in the eighth and concluding eighth chapter I reflect on the implications of this account for ongoing scholarship in the field of film, religion, and theology.

INTRODUCTION

Several nights a week for the last thirty years, an electric generator has spluttered to life in remote village or town square in India, followed by a flicker of light on a large white screen stretched between bamboo poles. Viewers, some wrapped in scarves against the cool night air, have seated themselves on mats on the ground or perched themselves in the branches of a tree or on a parked motorcycle, anticipating an evening of entertainment. They may have recognized some of the actors, but instead of a politically charged social film or a romantic comedy, the story that has unfolded has been about a 'Man of Compassion', otherwise known as Jesus.

Karunamayudu (1978; Telugu for 'Man of Compassion'), or *Daya Sagar* ('Ocean of Mercy'), as the film is known by its Hindi title, may be one of India's best-known movies of Jesus' life. Originally produced by commercial filmmakers in South India, it was subsequently redeployed for use in Christian witness, under the aegis of which it has been dubbed into fourteen Indian languages and is reportedly screened on a weekly basis by over two hundred and seventy exhibition teams. Furthermore, it has been a regular feature on local television networks during the Christmas and Easter seasons. Despite its ubiquity in India, however, the story of *Karunamayudu* remains relatively unknown to Western scholars of film, religion, and theology, and has rarely been mentioned in studies of Indian cinema.

In this thesis I analyze the production, content, distribution, and reception of *Karunamayudu* partly in response to that lacuna, but also on the premise that its story has something to offer discussions of film, religion, and theology. This examination of the film's history revolves around three questions: What religious traditions and experiences have informed the film's production, content, distribution, and reception? How has this film been appropriated by distributors, producers, and viewers? How

does such an approach to the history of this film contribute to our understanding of the tangled relationship between film, religion, and theology?

Emerging from this study, which draws on a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods, is one of the first in-depth analyses of a non-Western Jesus film. In addition to its archival value, this account uses empirical evidence to demonstrate the shifting contingencies that have marked the film's thirty-year journey through India and that continue to shape its distribution and reception. Those contingencies serve as a reminder that the relationship between film, religion, and theology is neither fixed nor entirely predictable. Nor can it be contained by the perceived meaning of the film itself, the relationship between the film and the cultural context in which it was produced, or an individual viewer's interpretation or appropriation of the film. This study draws on empirical evidence from the history of *Karunamayudu* to highlight the need for a way of mapping the shifting coordinates of film's relationship to religion and theology in global contexts.

The structure of this account follows the chronological history of *Karunamayudu* from its production to recent reception. In the first chapter I review briefly three critical discussions with which this study intersects. They include the literature on film, religion, and theology in the West, on Jesus in film, and on religion in Indian cinema. In chapter two I explain the development of my central research questions and discuss the methodological influences and challenges that shaped my approach. In chapter 3, I provide a detailed account of the film's production history that highlights the religious and cultural dynamics that marked *Karunamayudu's* journey to the silver screen. I devote chapter 4 to a discussion of Indian cinema and the role that perceptions of the industry and *Karunamayudu's* 'Indianness' have played in its production, distribution, and reception. In light of the film's production history and the context for which it was produced I turn in chapter 5 to analyze the film itself. My primary concerns include the film's representation of Jesus and how its theatrical release reflected the negotiations that marked its production. *Karunamayudu* was a box-office success, but even before its lengthy run in the cinema ended, a series of events occurred that would alter its future. Therefore chapter 6 begins with a historical account of the film's transition from commercial to non-commercial cinema. I then explore its significance for those currently involved in its exhibition

throughout India. In chapter 7 I discuss the film's reception, mostly among Telugu-speaking viewers, by drawing on a combination of semi-structured interviews, personal observation of screenings of the film, and feedback from the film's recent exhibitors. In the final chapter, I summarize the findings of the project and discuss its contributions to current discussions of film, religion, and theology. In addition, I outline some of the ways in which this study could be carried forward in future research and make some suggestions about how it could critically inform the analysis of public screenings of Jesus films.

CHAPTER ONE

A Literature Review

1. Introduction

Critical discussions about the relationship between film, religion, and theology have been developing for over forty years and, until recently, have turned primarily on the analysis of Western films. Furthermore, those discussions have been coloured predominantly by the concerns of Christian scholars interested in the theological or religious significance of film's relationship to Western culture. By focusing on the history of *Karunamayudu* (1978), an Indian 'Jesus film', this study is an extension of those established discourses. At the same time it complicates them by setting the question of film's relationship to religion and theology in a very different religious and cultural context. By way of introduction to the variables this study introduces to the discussion, I devote this chapter to a brief overview of three primary bodies of literature with which it intersects. They include the broader conversations about film, religion, and theology, the more narrowly focused treatments of Jesus in film, and the developing discussion of religion in Indian cinema.

2. Film, religion, and theology

The French film critic Andre Bazin once noted that 'the cinema has always been interested in God'.¹ The Christian Church, at least in the West, has also maintained a consistent interest in cinema. According to religious film historian Terry Lindvall, during the first decades of the twentieth century, enthusiasm for the filmic medium

¹ Andre Bazin, 'Cinema and Theology: The Case of Heaven over the Marshes', *Journal of Religion and Film* 6, no. 2 (2002) (accessed 16 Dec, 2008).

was nearly as prevalent within the Church as without.² With prophetic fervour one enthusiastic Christian pastor by the name of Herbert Jump argued that

the modern motion picture offers the most colossal opportunity for making a fresh moral and religious appeal to the non-Church portions of the community that has arisen in the history of recent Christianity.³

Not all Christians, however, were as enthusiastic, their concerns reflected in references to cinema as the 'devil's camera' or tracts addressing 'The Menace of the Religious Movie'.⁴ Apprehensions about the film industry as a whole were stoked by accounts of greedy producers and distributors as well as the scandalous activities of some actors. Moves toward film censorship in the 1920s combined with the emergence of radio as an alternative source of communication and entertainment to cool what had once been a vibrant relationship between the Church and the moving image industry.⁵

The Church's apprehensions about the cinematic medium, however, should not be misread as a lack of interest. Francis G. Couvares has argued convincingly that even those who played key roles in the Church's censorship of Hollywood were generally as concerned about preserving cinema as they were with policing it.⁶

² 'For many leaders at the end of the decade, the motion picture was not only a handmaiden for uplift, it had now become a savior'. Terry Lindvall, *The Silents of God: Selected Issues and Documents in Silent American Film and Religion 1908-1925* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2001), 218.

³ Herbert A. Jump, 'The Religious Possibilities of the Motion Picture' in *The Religion and Film Reader*, ed. Jolyon Mitchell and S. Brent Plate (New York and London: Routledge, 2007), 17.

⁴ R. G. Burnett and E. D. Martell, 'The Devil's Camera (1920)', in *The Religion and Film Reader*, ed. Jolyon Mitchell and S. Brent Plate (London: Routledge, 2007); A.W. Tozer, 'The Menace of the Religious Movie' (n.p.: n.d.)

⁵ Lindvall, *The Silents of God*, 311; Frank Walsh, *Sin and Censorship* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

⁶ Francis G. Couvares, 'Hollywood, Main Street and the Church: Trying to Censor the Movies before the Production Code', *American Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1992): 589. For more on the Church and censorship, see Gregory D. Black, *The Catholic Crusade against the Movies, 1940-1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

2.1 Historical Background

Despite the Church's long standing interest in cinema, however, critical analyses of the relationship between film, religion, and theology only emerged in the last four or five decades.⁷ Originally dominated by Christian theologians and scholars keen to use film criticism as a way of engaging with secular culture, conversations about film, religion, and theology have undergone a sea change in the last decade. Currently, the literature represents an interdisciplinary field of discourse shaped increasingly by cultural studies, religious studies, media studies, sociology, anthropology, and film studies.⁸ Concerted efforts to move the dialogue beyond its Eurocentric orbit have introduced even more variables.⁹ Despite the variety of methodologies employed, however, no single approach has dominated the conversation.¹⁰ Such diversification has, in turn, been accompanied by criticisms that the discourse has been too confessional and too heavily weighted toward a 'particular religious tradition', namely Christianity.¹¹ This is not entirely surprising, or unwarranted, given the conditions out of which the critical analysis of film and religion emerged.

As noted above, Christians in the West have had a conflicted relationship with the cinema, the most notorious chapter of which involved the Church's role in

⁷ John R. May, 'Contemporary Theories Regarding the Interpretation of Religious Film', in *New Image in Religious Film*, ed. John R. May (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997), 17; Ambros Eichenberger, 'Approaches to Film Criticism', in *New Image in Religious Film*, ed. John R. May (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997), 3-4. Ronald Holloway suggests that 'from the 1950s to the present Churches and a small body of educators and theologians have molded a new approach to a more sophisticated cinema'. Ronald Holloway, *Beyond the Image: Approaches to the Religion Dimension in the Cinema* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1977), 29.

⁸ For one of the most comprehensive overviews of the literature to date, see Terry Lindvall, 'Religion and Film, Part 1: History and Criticism', *Communication Research Trends* 23, no. 4 (2004); Terry Lindvall, 'Religion and Film, Part 2: Theology and Pedagogy', *Communication Research Trends* 24, no. 1 (2005).

⁹ See, for example, Rachel Dwyer, *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006); David Jasper and S. Brent Plate, eds., *Imag(in)ing Otherness: Filmic Visions of Living Together* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999); Jolyon P. Mitchell and S. Brent Plate, *The Religion and Film Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2007); S. Brent Plate, ed. *Representing Religion in World Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

¹⁰ Jolyon Mitchell, 'Theology and Film', in *The Modern Theologians*, ed. David F. Ford (London: Blackwell, 2005), 738.

¹¹ Christine Hoff-Kraemer, 'From Theological to Cinematic Criticism: Extricating the Study of Religion and Film from Theology', *Religious Studies Review* 30, no. 4 (2004), 249.

censoring the American film industry.¹² That period of influence came to an end with the demise of the Production Code c. 1960s, which may be considered a watershed in the Church's transition from its role as film censor to film critic.¹³ As Peter Hasenberg has suggested, however, a critical interest in rethinking the meaning of 'religious film', or the religious significance of film, is best understood against the larger backdrop of cultural upheaval in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁴ Watergate, the hippie movement, student revolts over the Vietnam War, and signs of revolution in Eastern Europe, all signalled radical shifts in Western perceptions of authority, morality, and ethics. By one account, it was the subsequent 'haemorrhage from the Church of a disenfranchised youth culture' that prompted theologians to initiate dialogue between Church and culture through the popular medium of film.¹⁵

It is unlikely, however, that troubled youth alone were responsible for the forays of Christian theologians and scholars into the field of film criticism during the 1960s and 70s. The secularization thesis was in ascendance and topics like the 'death of God' and 'religionless Christianity' were reconfiguring theological discourse.¹⁶ Christian theologians interested in engaging an increasingly secular culture often felt obliged to develop ways of expressing themselves unfettered by traditional theological terminology. Furthermore, television was beginning to saturate American society, reconfiguring cinema's relationship to culture in unforeseen ways.¹⁷

Concerned by the growing cultural influence of television and cinema, William Lynch, a Catholic theologian and literary critic, penned one of the earliest manifestos for a dialogue between theology and film. In his slim volume, *The Image Industries*, Lynch appealed to artists, theologians, critics, universities, and the general public to struggle creatively together on behalf of 'the very inward shape of

¹² See also James M. Skinner, *The Cross and the Cinema: The Legion of Decency and the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures, 1933-1970* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993).

¹³ May, 'Contemporary Theories Regarding the Interpretation of Religious Film', 17.

¹⁴ Peter Hasenberg, 'The 'Religious' in Film: From *King of Kings* to *the Fisher King*', in *New Image of Religious Film*, ed. John R. May (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1997), 42-44.

¹⁵ Steve Nolan, 'The Books of the Films: Trends in Religious Film-Analysis', *Literature and Theology* 12 Mr, no. (1998), 2.

¹⁶ See, for example, Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Contemporary Jesus* (London: SCM, 1998); Harvey Cox, *The Secular City*, Rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan Company, 1971); The much debated concept of 'religionless Christianity' derives from the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Eberhard Bethge, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM Press, 1953).

¹⁷ Holloway, 29.

the soul itself as it is inundated by our everyday images'.¹⁸ A decade later John C. Cooper and Carl Skrade urged theologians to dialogue with film as a way of reuniting the 'God-question' with the 'man-question' in the cause of human freedom.¹⁹ Other pioneers in the field took a page from contemporary trends in literary criticism and set out to identify traces of Christian theological themes in Western films.²⁰ Neil Hurley's premise that 'the movies are to the masses what theology is for an elite' was a foundational premise for much of the early discussion.²¹

In sum, critical studies of film's relationship to theology and religion originated in a Western milieu troubled by shifts in societal values, the spread of new media technologies, and the retreat of institutional Christianity from public life. Therefore, it would be misleading to attribute either the demise of the Production Code or a swell of disenfranchised youth alone with prompting a shift in the Church's relationship to the film industry. That said, the dissolution of the Code was integral to the history of film and religion because it signalled the irrevocable transfer of responsibility for discernment in film viewing from Church hierarchies to individuals.²²

2.2 Changing criteria

In this new environment some Christian scholars began to develop criteria for evaluating the religious significance of film that were not limited to moral concerns

¹⁸ William F. Lynch, *The Image Industries* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1960), 10. John R. May has summarized Lynch's four major concerns at the time: a failure in culture to discern between fantasy and reality, the control of the public imagination by not only a few people but a few forms, fixation on sex and violence, and the development of a preference for the spectacular. For a summary of Lynch's critique of mass media, see May, 'Contemporary Theories Regarding the Interpretation of Religious Film', 19.

¹⁹ John Charles Cooper and Carl Skrade, *Celluloid and Symbols* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1970), 22, quoted in Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 52; On a similar theme, see Neil P. Hurley, *The Reel Revolution: A Film Primer on Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1978).

²⁰ For a critique of such attempts by literary critics in America, see Daniel C. Noel, 'Nathan Scott and the Nostalgic Fallacy: A Close Reading of Theological Criticism', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 38, no. 4 (1970).

²¹ Neil P. Hurley, *Theology through Film* (New York and London: Harper & Row, 1970), 9.

²² Holloway, 34. See also, Peter P. Schillaci, *Movies and Morals* (Notre Dame, IN: Fides Publishers, 1968), 39.

about behaviours portrayed on screen.²³ Furthermore, at Vatican II the Roman Catholic Church adopted a more conciliatory stance toward the medium by endorsing constructive engagement with film as 'social communication'.²⁴ Not surprisingly, therefore, theologians and scholars rooted in the Christian tradition dominated attempts to theorize the religious dynamics of film.²⁵ They were not, however, trying only to dissociate the Church from the stigma of censorship. In his survey of the literature published in 1997, John R. May, one of the leading contributors to the conversation, suggested that broader theoretical issues were at stake:

When the basis for religious evaluation of films was morality, all films were considered at least potentially religious insofar as morality judges behavior and all feature films involve action of some sort. The tendency to limit the discussion . . . grew out of the developing desire to avoid the narrow discrimination of morality as a norm for deciding what was or was not religious in favor of the greater intellectual stimulation of theological issues.²⁶

Additionally, he noted that,

Just as the advocates of morality as a norm for evaluating film from a religious perspective began with the assumption that cinema is an art form and that morality was bound up with the aesthetic, so too the proponents of 'religious aesthetics' necessarily root their discussion of the religious implications of film in the formal elements of cinema itself.²⁷

To summarize, searching for 'cinematic analogues for religious insights' in film overtook moral censorship as the more satisfying intellectual enterprise for numerous

²³ May, 'Contemporary Theories Regarding the Interpretation of Religious Film', 34.

²⁴ Walter M. Abbott, ed. *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press; America Press; Association Press, 1966), 319.

²⁵ See the Preface to Michael S. Bird and John R. May, *Religion in Film* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), xi.

²⁶ May, 'Contemporary Theories Regarding the Interpretation of Religious Film', 34.

²⁷ Ibid. As Anthony Schillaci argued, 'The morality of a work of art, then, depends upon the degree to which a truth has been made incarnate in this beautiful work of creativity'. Schillaci, 30.

scholars.²⁸ Based on the premise that film is art, they began to evaluate a film's morality in terms of style as much as content. As Peter Schillaci, an early advocate for the study of film and religion, put it: 'Movies are truly Art, and . . . all true art must be moral'.²⁹ On a low art / high art continuum, a film's religiosity or morality became associated with high art and cinematic analogues to religion came to be explored in relation to a film's style, its story, and the realism with which it portrayed the human experience.

This particular approach to the analysis of films may also have been encouraged by the emergence in the 1960s of film criticism as an academic discipline, thanks in large part to the popularity of *auteur theory* that validated it as an offshoot of literary criticism.³⁰ Since many early religious film critics were themselves literary scholars of one stripe or another, the discussion 'has often been exclusively foxholed in the thematic and literary bases of film'.³¹ As May's survey of the literature indicated, however, not everyone perceived 'cinematic analogues' of religion in precisely the same way, nor did the evaluation of film on moral grounds die out altogether.³² I will now survey the eclectic range of approaches to the question of film's relationship to theology and religion that emerged.

2.3 Formative trajectories

In his survey of the scholarship on film, religion, and theology John R. May identified five major religious approaches to film criticism that developed in the literature from roughly the 1960s onward. *Religious discrimination* represented the

²⁸ May, 'Contemporary Theories Regarding the Interpretation of Religious Film', 34.

²⁹ Schillaci, 23. This position reflects Matthew Arnold's famous dictum that culture consists in the 'best which has been said and thought in the world'. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1883), xi.

³⁰ John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson, *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 5. For one of the most nuanced histories of film studies, see Dana B. Polan, *Scenes of Instruction: The Beginnings of the U.S. Study of Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

³¹ Antonio D. Sison, *Screening Schillebeeckx: Theology and Third Cinema in Dialogue* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 5.

³² See Michael Medved, *Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values* (London: HarperCollins, 1992).

Church's long-standing practice of passing judgment on the morality of films.³³ *Religious visibility* was the label he assigned to approaches that evaluated the religiosity of films in terms of their content by documenting elements such as: religious influences and symbolism, displays of crucifixes, portrayals of missionaries, liturgies and other religious rituals. *Religious dialogue*, as already mentioned, was an approach May associated especially with Protestant Churches' efforts to construct a discourse between film and theology. A fourth approach, that he labelled *religious humanism*, sought to understand the universal value of cinema on the premise that film and religion are both 'grounded in ultimate reality'.³⁴ Finally, proponents of *religious aesthetics* approached film as a potential source of religion in its own right because of its ability to 'produce a total environment' and alter our sense of reality and consciousness on multiple levels.³⁵ Proponents of the latter approach showed particular interest in at least three aspects of a given film. They included archetypal patterns (e.g. the road as symbol for a search for meaning), mythic orientations (e.g., Christ-figures in film), and the analogy of action (e.g. interdependent stories juxtaposed together can, in their similarity and difference, bring to light a central insight).³⁶

Several observations follow. By using the word 'religion', instead of Christianity, May appears to have been attempting a less sectarian framework for the discussion. Nevertheless, he specifically defined religion as 'the common ground held by all major religions', the genus of which 'Christianity and Judaism are among the species'.³⁷ Furthermore, he acknowledged that his taxonomy of approaches was informed by Christian theologian Paul Tillich's threefold paradigm of the Church's respective relationships to art. In a *heteronomous* relationship with culture, Tillich argued, the Church critiques it from without (religious discrimination). In a *theonomous* relationship (religious humanism), the Church recognizes its common

³³ All italics mine.

³⁴ May, 'Contemporary Theories Regarding the Interpretation of Religious Film', 20. Hurley can generally be associated with this latter approach.

³⁵ Thomas M. Martin, *Images and the Imageless: A Study in Religious Consciousness and Film* (Lewisburg, PA; London: Bucknell University Press; Associated University Presses, 1981), 46, quoted in May, 'Contemporary Theories Regarding the Interpretation of Religious Film', 28.

³⁶ May, 28-34; Furthermore, he noted that William Lynch's vision for participation by media producers as well as critics had yet be realized; missing from the table were filmmakers themselves. May, 'Contemporary Theories Regarding the Interpretation of Religious Film', 19.

³⁷ May, 'Contemporary Theories Regarding the Interpretation of Religious Film', 18.

ground with art, and in an *autonomous* relationship (religious aesthetics), the Church acknowledges that art must be judged according to its own norms.³⁸ The tendency to conflate religion and Christianity in the discussion is a testament to the predominant influence of the Christian tradition, a characteristic that has since come under scrutiny by scholars representing other disciplines.³⁹ May's survey also indicated that Christian critics were not unanimous in making the shift from moral to aesthetic evaluations of a film's religiosity. That said, the basic assumption that film is art appears to have remained intact, and aesthetic analyses of a film's religiosity continued to be governed largely by the premise that the quality of a work indicated its religious significance.⁴⁰ According to May, Thomas Martin was one of the few to 'move beyond morality, explicit religious elements, or humanistic themes to define religious significance in terms of cinema's specific art'.⁴¹

In 2000, Robert K. Johnston, a Protestant, published a survey similar to May's. In contrast to May's 'religious' approach, Johnston framed his review explicitly in terms of '*theological* approaches to film criticism' within the Christian Church.⁴² Although his model also featured five trajectories, he employed H. Richard Niebuhr's typology of the Church's relationship to culture instead of Tillich's (the categories of which I refer to below in brackets).⁴³ Furthermore, he associated each of the five attitudes with a particular Christian tradition. For example, he associated an attitude of *avoidance* (Christ against culture) with Anabaptists and fundamentalists, a view most radically expressed in the boycotting of films deemed controversial or blasphemous. *Caution* (Christ and culture in paradox) was characterized by a resigned acceptance, but suspicious analysis of film, an approach he associated with Lutherans and conservative evangelicals. A third approach advocated *dialogue*,

³⁸ For more on Tillich's perspectives on art, culture and religion, see his discussion of 'Religion and Secular Culture' in Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), chapter 4; Paul Tillich, 'Art and Ultimate Reality', in *Art, Creativity and the Sacred* ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: Continuum, 1995).

³⁹ Below I will discuss briefly some of the alternative approaches that have been applied to the discussion.

⁴⁰ Christopher Deacy and Gaye Ortiz, *Theology and Film: Challenging the Sacred/Secular Divide* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008).

⁴¹ May, 'Contemporary Theories Regarding the Interpretation of Religious Film', 28. See also, Martin.

⁴² Emphasis mine. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 41. As Christopher Deacy has noted, 'religion' is often used interchangeably with 'theology'. Christopher Deacy, *Faith in Film: Religious Themes in Contemporary Cinema* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 4.

⁴³ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1952).

bringing film and theology into two-way conversation' (Christ the transformer of culture).⁴⁴ In Johnston's view the Reformed traditions, 'mainstream Protestants and progressive evangelicals', were exemplars of this latter stance. Fourth, an agenda of *appropriation* (Christ of culture) represented a willingness on the part of theology to learn from film.⁴⁵ According to Johnston, this fourth approach has been characteristic of liberal Protestantism. Finally *divine encounter* (Christ above culture) represented a Roman Catholic, or 'sacramental mainline and evangelical Protestant' appreciation for film's 'sacramental capacity to provide the viewer an experience of transcendence'.⁴⁶

One need not accept Johnston's denominational caricatures or Richard Niebuhr's taxonomy of Church and culture as definitive in order to recognize the relationship between theological and religious traditions and Christians' encounters with film. Johnston's own approach is a case in point. His interest in the *dialogue* between theology and film is consistent with his professional affiliation with mainstream Protestants and progressive evangelicals.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, he has acknowledged an interest in the sacramental potential of film and has even argued that one must turn to Roman Catholic filmmakers for a 'robust theology of the image'.⁴⁸ At the same time, however, he has asserted that the 'autonomous' approach described by May is inadequate as criticism.⁴⁹ 'Having assisted viewers to better see the religious import of a film', he has argued, theological critics must 'go on to engage the film's centre of meaning from their own theological perspective'.⁵⁰ In Johnston's view, theological dialogue with film consists first in subjecting oneself to the experience of a given movie and only then responding to that encounter with the

⁴⁴ Johnston, 54.

⁴⁵ Ibid. This is the one category that Johnston fails to identify with a particular denomination.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 59; Johnston, 57. That said, Johnston concedes that the religious traditions he identifies are caricatures. Ibid., 58. Recently, Chris Deacy has published an expanded and updated survey of Christian attitudes to film also modeled on Niebuhr's categories. In contrast to Johnston, however, he does not identify denominations, nor does he present the five approaches on a continuum, thereby avoiding the insinuation that they represent a developmental trajectory. Deacy and Ortiz, *Theology and Film: Challenging the Sacred/Secular Divide*, chapter 1.

⁴⁷ Italics mine. Johnston is currently Professor of Theology and Culture at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA.

⁴⁸ Johnston, 76.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 76.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 164.

analytical tools at one's disposal.⁵¹

May's and Johnston's surveys of the literature demonstrate that Christian approaches to film criticism, despite their influence in the discussion of film, religion, and theology, have not been homogenous. It is commonly acknowledged that Roman Catholics and Protestants have tended to approach films from two different perspectives on God's relationship to creation. Andrew Greeley, a Roman Catholic sociologist and film critic, has argued that his tradition emphasizes the immanence of God in the world, whereas Protestants emphasize God's transcendence.⁵² Consequently, Roman Catholics have tended to see the 'metaphorical dimension of creation as a sacrament of God'.⁵³ Gaye Ortiz has attributed this propensity to a close relationship in the 'Catholic theological framework' between art, 'analogy, sacramentalism and incarnation', wherein creation is perceived 'as potentially a symbol of divine in-dwelling'.⁵⁴ As a result, Roman Catholics have been prone to approach film as a product of culture that can be appreciated as both sacramental and as a site for dialogue with non-believers. Thus, Neil Hurley, a Roman Catholic, argued—as quoted earlier—that 'movies are to the masses what theology is to the elite'.⁵⁵ It also explains why Greeley entertained the notion that God was *incognito* in the sensuous character of Angelique (Jessica Lange) in *All that Jazz* (1979).⁵⁶

By contrast, Protestants who have analyzed films rather than censored them, have tended to work from an understanding of culture as capable of echoing divine truth rather than as sacramental. The Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, whose understanding of theology and culture has provided the theoretical backbone for

⁵¹ Johnston, 162-164.

⁵² Andrew Greeley, 'Theology and Sociology: On Validating David Tracy', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59, no. 4 (1991): 644. Indeed, as Greeley argues in this article, these two perspectives play out in a tendency among Catholics toward emphasizing the 'communal', whereas Protestants tend to be more 'individualist'. Greeley, 645.

⁵³ Greeley, 644.

⁵⁴ Gaye Ortiz, 'The Catholic Church and Its Attitude to Film', in *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture*, ed. Jolyon Mitchell and Sophia Marriage (London: T & T Clark, 2003). 180. Sallie McFague, quoted in *Ibid.*, 181. See also *Ibid.*, 186.

⁵⁵ Hurley, *Theology through Film*, ix.

⁵⁶ Albert J. Bergesen and Andrew M. Greeley, *God in the Movies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000), 40-42. By focusing on Christian approaches, I do not mean to suggest that other traditions do not have a theology, but to highlight the historical influences on the literature.

many contributors to the discussion, put the presupposition this way:

In every cultural creation—a picture, a system, a law, a political movement (however secular it may appear)—an ultimate concern is expressed, and . . . it is possible to recognize the unconscious theological character of it.⁵⁷

To recognize the theological character of a cultural product like film, however, is one step removed from approaching it as sacrament. Broadly speaking, Protestant engagement with movies has been characterized as an attempt to articulate the theological significance of movies, rather than as a search for God's presence in them.⁵⁸ Albert J. Bergesen, a Protestant film critic, has argued for example that *The Field of Dreams* (1989) evoked a 'Protestant-like religious imagination' that finds 'no trace of God's presence in the created world'.⁵⁹

As instructive as it may be to recognize such theological distinctions, they must not be interpreted as hard and fast categories. As Greeley and Bergesen also acknowledged in *God in the Movies*, their Catholic and Protestant Gods have much in common.⁶⁰ Furthermore, as the collection of essays in Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz's *Explorations in Theology and Film* demonstrated, there has been considerable dialogue between contributors from the two traditions.⁶¹

In addition to highlighting the diversity of Christian approaches to film criticism, May and Johnston's surveys highlight the need for theological awareness when evaluating the discourse on film and religion. John Lyden has argued that the analysis of film and religion needs to be loosed from its moorings in the Christian

⁵⁷ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 27. John R. May, a Roman Catholic, adapted Tillich's categories when sorting the various religious approaches to film.

⁵⁸ That said, a spate of books has been published recently that suggests a reevaluation of this generalization may be necessary. See, for example, Roy M. Anker, *Catching Light: Looking for God in the Movies* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004); Craig Detweiler, *Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

⁵⁹ Bergesen and Greeley, 58.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶¹ Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz, eds., *Explorations in Theology and Film* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997). For more on the tensions between confession and practice, see William A. Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture: The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006).

tradition, especially, the normative assumption that Christian theology completes our understanding of the religious or theological significance of a given film.⁶² Yet it is precisely because of his familiarity with Western Christian theology and the nuances of Protestant and Catholic interpretations of culture, that he could articulate their underlying premises to which his project was a response.⁶³

In sum, the shift towards a more critical analysis of film's relationship to religion and theology in the 1960s and 70s in America can be attributed to several factors: the declining influence of organized religion (especially Christianity), the recognition of film as a legitimate object of intellectual scrutiny, and the demise of the Production Code. Given that the Christian tradition had the most at stake in these transitions, however, it is not surprising that the formative literature was moulded by the concerns of Christian theologians and scholars.⁶⁴ These influences can be noted in the tendency among contributors to conflate terms like 'religion', 'Christianity' and 'theology', and in keeping with the secularization thesis as commonly understood in the West, to situate religion in a kind of binary opposition to culture.⁶⁵

A basic awareness of the theological influences and cultural contexts in which the formative literature on film and religion developed serves this project in at least two ways. It provides some historical background for understanding subsequent developments in the conversation and gaps that have yet to be filled. It also offers some points of comparison for discussing religion in Indian cinema and the Indian context in which *Karunamayudu* was produced and continues to be screened. Despite its origins in the Christian tradition, the study of film, religion, and theology has not remained the exclusive domain of theologians. Terry Lindvall's survey of the literature—which followed May's and Johnston's—examined the 'methods of research or postures of intent' that scholars have employed, rather than their

⁶² John Lyden, *Film as Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 34, 40. His argument that film can be treated as religion finds some resonance in Bryan Stone's claim that 'the relationship between Christian theology and popular film is, in short, an interfaith dialogue'. Bryan Stone, *Faith and Film: Theological Themes at the Cinema* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000), 7.

⁶³ Lyden, 11-35.

⁶⁴ Two formative texts in this tradition are Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000); Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz, eds., *Explorations in Theology and Film* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

⁶⁵ Harvey Cox distinguished secularization from secularism as 'the loosing of the world from religious and quasi-religious understandings of itself, the dispelling of all closed worldviews, the breaking of all supernatural myths and [end page] sacred symbols. . . . [it] occurs when man turns his attention from worlds beyond and toward this world and this time (*saeculum* = 'this present age')'. Cox, 1-2.

'theological positions or critical attitudes toward film'.⁶⁶ Lindvall's overview, which filled two issues of *Communication Research Trends*, included categories such as 'Film History and Religion', 'Film Criticism and Religion', 'Theology and Film', and 'Film Pedagogy and Application'.⁶⁷ Although already dated, the methodological diversity represented in Lindvall's survey indicates how the discussion has exceeded its original theological ambit. A number of those key developments are the subject of the next section.

2.4 Expanding the field

Generally speaking, new directions in the discussion have developed in response to its formative Christian theological bias, the propensity to treat films as literature, and its blatant Eurocentrism, or in Elizabeth Castelli's words, the 'hegemony of both Christianity and Hollywood' in the writing on film, religion, and theology.⁶⁸ Granted, purported attempts to avoid such biases run through the literature from Michael Bird and John R. May's *Religion in Film* to Robert Johnston's *Reel Spirituality*. May argued, for example, that one must let a film dictate the parameters of its religious significance, and only then bring theological or religious criticism to bear on it.⁶⁹ As theologian and film critic Antonio D. Sison has argued, however, despite their best intentions, such critics have demonstrated little ability to analyze the religious or theological dynamics of film from a stylistic perspective.⁷⁰ His study, *Screening Schillebeeckx*, was an attempt to rectify this fault by examining the relationship between Edward Schillebeeckx's theology and Third Cinema. Charles Keil's essay on

⁶⁶ Lindvall, 'Religion and Film, Part 2: Theology and Pedagogy', 3.

⁶⁷ Lindvall, 'Religion and Film, Part 1: History and Criticism'; Lindvall, 'Religion and Film, Part 2: Theology and Pedagogy'.

⁶⁸ Elizabeth A. Castelli, 'Series Editor Preface', in *Representing Religion in World Cinema*, ed. S. Brent Plate (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), vii. For a helpful discussion on 'foreignness' see Gaye Ortiz, 'World Cinema: Opportunities for Dialogue with Religion and Theology', in *Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline*, ed. Robert K. Johnston (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007).

⁶⁹ Johnston; John R. May, 'Visual Story and the Religious Interpretation of Film', in *Religion in Film*, ed. Michael Bird and John R. May (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 26.

⁷⁰ Sison, 5. Notable exceptions for Sison are Paul Schrader's *Transcendental Style* and Peter Fraser's *Images of the Passion*.

the reasons for stylistic retardation in religious films provided an alternative example of such an approach.⁷¹ In the following sections I address briefly some of the ways the discussion has been reframed.

2.4.1 Redefining religion

Efforts to emancipate the discussion of film and religion from the domination of Christian theology have generally involved attempts to redefine religion or relocate questions of religion in the broader context of cultural or ideological criticism. Whether or not such attempts have been successful, however, remains a matter of debate.

Joel Martin and Conrad Ostwalt put forward one of the first major proposals designed to move the discussion away from a strictly theological framework by combining theological, mythological, and ideological criticism.⁷² Alternatively, John Lyden has argued that Clifford Geertz's understanding of religion as a symbolic system avoided the temptation to evaluate a film's significance according to the normative bias of a theological (or ideological) perspective.⁷³ Christine Hoff-Kramer, otherwise in favour of escaping the dominant influence of the Christian theological tradition, downplayed Lyden's approach as 'absurd', arguing that film 'by its nature can never be as complex as a world religion'.⁷⁴ Theologian and scholar of popular culture, Gordon Lynch, has also questioned whether there is sufficient empirical evidence to indicate that film actually functions as a set of resources for interpreting life.⁷⁵ Furthermore, in my view Lyden has subsumed religion under the category of culture in such a way that 'film as religion' becomes virtually interchangeable with

⁷¹ Charles Keil, 'From the Manger to the Cross: The New Testament Narrative and the Question of Stylistic Retardation', in *Une Invention Du Diable? Cinema Des Premiers Temps Et Religion*, ed. Roland Cosandey, Andre Gaudreault, and Tom Gunning (Sainte-Foy, Quebec: Les Presses de L'Universite Laval, 1992).

⁷² Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr., eds., *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995).

⁷³ Lyden, 41.

⁷⁴ Hoff-Kraemer: 249.

⁷⁵ See Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 28-33.

'film as culture'. The major difference between Lyden and Tillich's approaches, then, is merely a question of scope. Whereas Tillich assumed that questions of ultimate and universal concern to humanity could find an answer in Christian theology, Lyden seemed more willing to entertain the possibility of multiple closed systems or communities of concern.

Somewhat differently, Melanie J. Wright has recently suggested that the normative claims of confessional approaches can be avoided by situating the discourse in the realm of cultural studies.⁷⁶ It is not a particularly novel approach; variations of this premise can be found in the works of Gerald Forshey, Bruce Babington and Robert Evans, and Richard Walsh.⁷⁷ Furthermore, such a move has been complicated by the insider/outsider debates that have plagued the field of religious studies.⁷⁸ Gerard Loughlin, for example, recently asserted that only persons of faith are capable of engaging in the theological enterprise.⁷⁹ William Telford, who has published multiple articles in the field, has argued to the contrary that it is possible to study theology as one would any other academic subject.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, there have been some new developments, both in the way cultural studies approaches have been employed and the increasing number of cultures included.

In *Film and Religion*, Paul V.M. Flesher and Robert Torry proposed a cultural studies approach that examined how films use religion to address cultural issues.⁸¹ Although they have devoted a large portion of their book to a review of biblical epics, however, Flesher and Torry included discussions related to traditions such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism. Unfortunately, their contribution

⁷⁶ Melanie J. Wright, *Religion and Film* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 27.

⁷⁷ Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans, *Biblical Epics: Sacred Narrative in the Hollywood Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993); Gerald E. Forshey, *American Religious and Biblical Spectaculars* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1992); Richard Walsh, *Reading the Gospels in the Dark* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003).

⁷⁸ Kim Knott, 'Insider / Outsider Perspectives', in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. John R. Hinnells (London: Routledge, 2005), 243-258.

⁷⁹ Gerard Loughlin, 'Cinéma Divinité: A Theological Introduction', in *Cinéma Divinité: Religion, Theology and the Bible in Film*, ed. Eric Christianson, Peter Francis, and William R. Telford (London: SCM, 2005), 3.

⁸⁰ William R. Telford, 'Through a Lens Darkly: Critical Approaches to Theology and Film', in *Cinema Divinité: Religion, Theology and the Bible in Film*, ed. Eric Christianson, Peter Francis, and William R. Telford (London: SCM, 2005).

⁸¹ Paul Virgil McCracken Flesher and Robert Torry, *Film & Religion: An Introduction* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 3. This title should not be confused with Wright's.

was limited by the decision to ignore questions of directorial intention and the reception of films.⁸² More recently, it has been suggested that film and religion be studied as processes of mediation or remediation. In the words of S. Brent Plate, 'As mediations, the framing and projecting activities of religion-making and filmmaking take the world "out there" and bring it "in here," to our temple, to our table, to our theatre'.⁸³ Stephen Hughes and Birgit Meyer's introduction to a special issue of *Postscripts* on film and religion contained a similar assertion that 'there can be no unmediated experience of religion and film, but only remediation upon other religious and filmic mediation'.⁸⁴ Both of these latter approaches reflect a 'postsecularist perspective' dismissive of the notion that religion has somehow retreated from the public sphere.⁸⁵

In my view the revolt against Christianity's hegemony by scholars from other disciplines is not necessarily a reaction to sectarian perspectives, for to denigrate one sectarian approach on confessional grounds is to denigrate them all. Had it not been for the contributions of confessional scholars there may not have been a body of literature to criticise. Furthermore, while the definition of religion as remediation downplays the normative role of theology, it nevertheless recognizes by default the potential contribution that theological traditions play in the process. I suspect, instead, that the rub has been in the implied assertion, intended or not, that any one sectarian position could function normatively for all.

Karunamayudu's story confounds both tendencies. Although *Karunamayudu* is a movie about Jesus, one would be hard pressed to suggest that Christianity played a hegemonic role either in its production or reception history. Indeed, the film's journey through India has been marked largely by the interplay of Christianity and Hinduism. Furthermore, the conditions in which it was produced complicate Western conceptions of secularization so often articulated by the binaries of sacred/secular, Church/state, or public/private.⁸⁶

⁸² Flesher and Torry, 5.

⁸³ Plate, ed., 3.

⁸⁴ Stephen Hughes and Birgit Meyer, 'Guest Editors' Preface', *Postscripts* 1.2 / 1.3, no. (2005): 152.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 150.

⁸⁶ In India, secularization has been conceived as a context in which all religious communities live together in peace. Ashis Nandy, 'The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance', *Alternatives* 13, no. 2 (1988).

2.4.2 Beyond Eurocentrism

By virtue of its focus on an Indian film, therefore, this study joins a number of others in shifting attention away from the literature's predominantly Eurocentric orbit and 'Hollywoodcentrism'.⁸⁷ One need only review the index of films in many of the books on film, religion, and theology to recognize that Hollywood movies have been the star attraction to date.⁸⁸ This is understandable, given that many of the contributors have been based in the Americas, Europe, and Australia, writing mostly for a readership whose understanding of cinema is dominated by Hollywood fare.⁸⁹ The danger with such a scenario, however, is that critics writing in those contexts may be lulled into assuming that Hollywood's ubiquity justifies the making of sweeping claims about film's relationship to religion everywhere. As Indian cinema scholar Vijay Mishra has warned, the evaluation of Indian films requires 'special skills of interpretation and [a] thoroughgoing knowledge of Indian culture'.⁹⁰

This study also represents another bias in the literature – the dominance of English. As Freek L. Bakker has argued recently, the general bias toward English as the language of discourse in the sciences is problematic because it excludes the voices of certain scholars from other parts of the world, and may work to the detriment of the discussion as a whole. He has asserted, for example, that certain German publications on the topic of film and religion from the *Film und Theologie* group are often of 'higher quality than those issued in America'.⁹¹ Although I am in no position to adjudicate his claim, contributions in English from scholars in continental Europe are comparatively rare.⁹² Notable exceptions to Bakker's

⁸⁷ Plate, ed., 9. One humorous indication of this cultural myopia is Richard Walsh's reference to Canadian Denys Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal* (1988) as the work of a 'foreign' filmmaker. Walsh, *Reading the Gospels in the Dark*, 177. Imagine how the texture of the discussion would change if British or European authors adopted the same terminology for Hollywood movies.

⁸⁸ There are concentric circles of bias even within this Eurocentric ethos. See Jasper and Plate, eds.

⁸⁹ That little attention has been paid to religion in non-Western cinemas is evident even in Lindvall's survey of the literature. Despite the commendable reach of his overview, the only source he discusses that involves non-Western cinemas is S. Brent Plate's edited collection of essays. Plate, ed.

⁹⁰ Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), xviii.

⁹¹ Freek L. Bakker, 'Editorial', *Exchange* 33, no. 4 (2004): 307.

⁹² Important exceptions include Hasenberg; Reinhold Zwick, 'The Problem of Evil in Contemporary Film', in *New Image of Religious Film*, ed. John R. May (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1997).

complaint, however, include the highly instructive volume *L'Invention du Diable*, with articles in English and French, as well as Cheryl Exum's *The Bible in Film: The Bible and Film*, which features pieces in English and German.⁹³

Bakker's criticism also highlights the lack of attention that has been paid to English literature about film and religion from beyond Western borders. During my travel in India, for example, I discovered a slim volume by C.R.W. David, entitled *Cinema as Medium of Communication in Tamilnadu*.⁹⁴ One of the themes David addresses is religion in South Indian cinema. Likewise, I have yet to find a reference to the works of Fr. Gaston Roberge in most surveys of the literature, despite his numerous treatments of Indian film.⁹⁵ I was also pleasantly surprised to find buried in the archives of United Theological College in Bangalore, India, two unpublished B.D. theses that discussed 'Images of Christ and Christians in Tamil Cinema' and 'The Christian Message of Forgiveness as Seen in the Indian Films'.⁹⁶ I was particularly struck by their awareness of Western films and theology. The essay on images of Christ in film, for example, not only referred to *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), but began with an overview of theological perspectives on Jesus ranging across the works of Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Jürgen Moltmann, Albert N. Whitehead, James Cone, Gustavo Guitierrez, Mahatma Gandhi, Brahmabandha Upadhyaya, Appaswami and Robin Boyd.⁹⁷ I suspect that few bachelor-level students writing on theology and film, at least in North America, would be familiar with Western as well as Indian theologians and films. When the history of debates about film, religion, and theology is rewritten to include non-Western contexts, Indian scholars should be recognized for their role in the story.⁹⁸

⁹³ Roland Cosandey and others, *Une Invention Du Diable? J. Cheryl Exum, The Bible in Film: The Bible and Film* (Leiden, The Netherlands, and Boston: Brill, 2006).

⁹⁴ C.R.W. David, *Cinema as Medium of Communication in Tamilnadu* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1983).

⁹⁵ Gaston Roberge, *Chitra Bani: A Book on Film Appreciation*, 1st ed. (Calcutta: Chitra Bani, 1974); Gaston Roberge, *Another Cinema for Another Society* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1985); Gaston Roberge, *Satyajit Ray: Essays (1970-2005)* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2007).

⁹⁶ J. Isaac Moon, 'Image of Christ and Christians in Tamil Cinema' (B.D. thesis, United Theological College, 1976); O. Rajendra Prasad, 'The Christian Message of Forgiveness as Seen in the Indian Films' (B.D. thesis, United Theological College, 1981).

⁹⁷ Moon, 44.

⁹⁸ Neil P. Hurley, 'Christ-Transfigurations in Film: Notes on a Meta-Genre', *Journal of Popular Culture* 13, no. 3 (1980).

By examining the question of film's relationship to religion and theology in the context of Indian cinema, therefore, this project joins a growing body of work concerned with religion and global cinema. I mention several key examples. John R. May's edited work *New Image of Religious Film* may have been one of the first Western publications to include essays on non-Western cinemas, treating religion in Indian, African and Latin American cinema.⁹⁹ Since May's publication, the trend has gained momentum. S. Brent Plate's *Representing Religion in World Cinema* is a collation of essays on films from a variety of cultural contexts.¹⁰⁰ Jolyon Mitchell and S. Brent Plate's recent *The Religion and Film Reader* opened up the world of cinema through excerpted texts from a broad cross-section of writing on cinema from around the globe.¹⁰¹ Birgit Meyer's work on Ghanaian video-films, Brian Larkin's work on Islam and Bollywood films in Nigeria, and the recent issue of *Postscripts* journal noted above, represent a groundswell of scholarship to which this work is a modest contribution.¹⁰² Melanie J. Wright deliberately analyzed Indian films in her fine book, *Religion and Film*.¹⁰³ David Shepherd's recent *Images of the Word: Hollywood's Bible and Beyond* included an essay by this author on *Karunamayudu*, and Robert K. Johnston's *Remaking Theology and Film* featured an article on foreignness by Gaye Ortiz.¹⁰⁴ Two co-authored volumes, one by Christopher Deacy and Gaye Ortiz, and the other by Paul V. M. Flesher and Robert Torry, included qualifying statements that acknowledged the Western location from which they were written.¹⁰⁵ Flesher and Torry also deliberately addressed religious traditions other than Christianity, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism and Islam.¹⁰⁶ They may have been overzealous, however, in claiming that their method of 'letting the film

⁹⁹ I will use 'cinema' throughout to refer to film industries or, as the context will indicate, what might elsewhere be referred to as a 'movie theatre'. See the last three chapters of John R. May, ed. *New Image of Religious Film* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997).

¹⁰⁰ Plate, ed.

¹⁰¹ Mitchell and Plate, *The Religion and Film Reader*.

¹⁰² Alternatively, see *Postscripts* 1.2/1.3 (2005).

¹⁰³ Wright.

¹⁰⁴ Dwight Friesen, 'Karunamayudu: Seeing Christ Anew in Indian Cinema', in *Images of the Word: Hollywood's Bible and Beyond*, ed. David Shepherd (Atlanta: SBL, 2008); Ortiz, 'World Cinema: Opportunities for Dialogue with Religion and Theology'.

¹⁰⁵ Deacy and Ortiz, *Theology and Film: Challenging the Sacred/Secular Divide*, 75, n.2; Flesher and Torry, xii.

¹⁰⁶ Flesher and Torry, 241-297.

determine which methods are used for analysis' is applicable 'to any type of film, from any country, about any religion'.¹⁰⁷ Rachel Dwyer's recent *Filming the Gods*, which I will discuss in greater detail below, provided what may be the first book on the topic of religion in Indian cinema.¹⁰⁸

2.4.3 Beyond literary analysis

This study also complements efforts to expand the range of methodologies employed beyond the realm of literary approaches to film criticism. Steve Nolan was one of the first to argue that 'religious film criticism has largely regarded film in terms of literary theory'.¹⁰⁹ In other words, critics have for too long focused either on the director's intentions, the search for thematic parallels between a film's narrative and 'religious questions or doctrines', or the use of 'theological categories as hermeneutical tools'.¹¹⁰

Nolan mentioned seven key contributors who have employed this technique, including John R. May, Ernest Ferlita, Neil Hurley, and a number of biblical and theological scholars like Robert Jewett and Larry J. Kreitzer. Jewett has attempted to 'throw new light on our current circumstances' by imagining an 'interpretive arch' that has one end in the ancient world and the other in the world of a given film.¹¹¹ Kreitzer adopted a similar approach, blending analyses of film, literature, and scriptural texts in a trilogy of works designed to find new ways of reading the biblical text' by 'reversing the hermeneutical flow'.¹¹² Others have taken a similar

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 3.

¹⁰⁸ Dwyer.

¹⁰⁹ Steve Nolan, 'Towards a New Religious Film Criticism: Using Film to Understand Religious Identity Rather Than Locate Cinematic Analogue', in *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture*, ed. Jolyon Mitchell and Sophia Marriage (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 170, 177.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 177.

¹¹¹ Robert Jewett, *Saint Paul Returns to the Movies* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 4. Although biblical texts and authors are discussed in the context of the ancient world, it seems that Jewett's approach would be richer if he included a dialogue with the producer of the films to match his dialogue with Saint Paul.

¹¹² The range of subjects Kreitzer covers is remarkable. From a discussion of the Magi, complemented by insights from T.S. Eliot and scenes from Jesus films, he turns to compare Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), the 'abominating horror' in Mark

approach. Adele Reinhartz is another biblical scholar 'who has become particularly attuned to the frequent appearance of scripture on the silver screen'.¹¹³ Her thorough analysis of twelve films in *Scripture on Screen* (2003) was an attempt to revive biblical literacy (and attract undergraduates to biblical studies).¹¹⁴ In *Screening Scripture*, George Aichele and Richard Walsh claimed to go where few of those writing about theology or scripture and film had gone before, by proposing a nuanced and intertextual rewriting (or repeating) of the Scriptures. Their goal was to 'produce commentaries on the biblical stories and on the culture that produces and consumes both the Scripture and the movies'.¹¹⁵ New Testament scholar Mark Goodacre has gone so far as to suggest that Jesus films may even help to solve the synoptic problem (although Gerald F. Downing is doubtful).¹¹⁶ Theologian Bryan Stone has found it fruitful to employ films in his reflections on Christian creeds.¹¹⁷

Alternatively, Nolan argued for an exploration of 'film as *experience* rather than *text*'.¹¹⁸ He is not alone. John Lyden, for example, has called for ethnographic reception analyses in the field of film, religion, and theology.¹¹⁹ S. Brent Plate, in a reflective review of the literature on Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, asked why in all of the hype surrounding the film more attention was not paid to the reactions of viewers.¹²⁰ He has since taken that query to the extreme, drawing on

13.14 and the 'whore of Babylon' in Revelation 17-18. Larry J. Kreitzer, *The New Testament in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993).

¹¹³ Adele Reinhartz, *Scripture on the Silver Screen* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 3.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. One reviewer remarked that after her rigorous treatment, there may not be much left for undergraduates to explore. Clayton N. Jefford, 'Adele Reinhartz, *Scripture on the Silver Screen*', *Homiletic* 29, no. 1 (2004).

¹¹⁵ George Aichele and Richard Walsh, eds., *Screening Scripture: Intertextual Connections between Scripture and Film* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), x-xi, viii, ix.

¹¹⁶ Mark S. Goodacre, 'The Synoptic Jesus and the Celluloid Christ: Solving the Synoptic Problem through Film', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, no. 80 (2000): 31-43; F. Gerald Downing, 'Dissolving the Synoptic Problem through Film?', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, no. 84 (2001).

¹¹⁷ Stone.

¹¹⁸ Nolan, 'The Books of the Films: Trends in Religious Film-Analysis': 9. Emphasis mine.

¹¹⁹ Lyden sees ethnographic study primarily as an antidote to the sweeping assumptions made by some ideological critics about the ways in which films influence people. Lyden, 29, 32.

¹²⁰ S. Brent Plate, 'Timothy K. Beal and Tod Linafelt, eds., *Mel Gibson's Bible: Religion Popular Culture, and the Passion of the Christ*; Kathleen Corley and Robert Webb, eds., *Jesus and Mel Gibson's the Passion of the Christ*; Philip A. Cunningham, ed., *Pondering the Passion: What's at Stake for Christians and Jews?*; Paula Fredricksen, *on the Passion of the Christ: Exploring the Issues Raised by the Controversial Movie*; Zev Garber, ed., *Mel Gibson's Passion: The Film, the*

Maurice Merleau Ponty's concept of the 'aesthesiological body' to raise a number of questions about the role of the human body in cinematic and religious experience.¹²¹ How, for example, might our understanding of the relationship between religion and film be reconceived by acknowledging the ways films stir the body to action?¹²² In addition to his own contributions to the film and theology conversation, Clive Marsh has been a leader in probing the religious or theological significance of film reception. His primary concern in *Cinema and Sentiment* was to ask 'what films do to people and what people do with films'.¹²³ More recently, in *Theology Goes to the Movies*, he grappled with the question of 'what films can do to and for ordinary viewers'.¹²⁴

By attending not only to the structure and content of *Karunamayudu*, but also to its reception, this study moves beyond the strong tradition of textual analysis that has dominated discussions of film, religion, and theology. To use the words of film scholar Janet Staiger, I have attempted in part to give a voice to the 'unspoken mass' of viewers without 'access to public and printed records of communication'.¹²⁵ At the same time, I do not mean to discount altogether the practice of analyzing the film as text. Chapter 5 is a study of *Karunamayudu* itself. My broader objective is perhaps best described as a theologically informed history of the film.

2.4.4 Toward a theologically informed film history

In addition to his comprehensive survey of the literature on film, religion, and theology, Terry Lindvall has made at least two other significant contributions in the

Controversy, and Its Implications; Jorge Gracia, *Mel Gibson's Passion and Philosophy*; Shawn J. Landres and Michael Berenbaum, eds., *after the Passion Is Gone: American Religious Consequences*, *Christianity and Literature* 56, no. 3 (2007), 537.

¹²¹ Ibid., 261.

¹²² Ibid., 262.

¹²³ Clive Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment: Film's Challenge to Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2004), 1.

¹²⁴ Clive Marsh, *Theology Goes to the Movies: An Introduction to Critical Christian Thinking* (London: Routledge, 2007), 3.

¹²⁵ Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton and Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1992), 211.

form of historical analyses of religious, or, more particularly, 'Christian films'.¹²⁶ *Silents of God* and *Sanctuary Cinema* are fascinating reads on the history of religious filmmaking.¹²⁷ In a recent essay, however, Lindvall issued a call for more 'theologically informed' film histories, or, to use the phrase he has playfully coined, for a *kinoheilsgeschichte* (religious film history).¹²⁸ He has argued that our understanding and criticism of films must include attention to both the context in which they have been produced and received, and the people who have watched them.¹²⁹ To quote religion and film scholar Jolyon Mitchell, this study may be read as a response to the call for an examination of 'the relationships between diverse traditions found within Indian religions and the media'.¹³⁰ Having identified how this study fills a number of gaps in the current literature on film, religion, and theology, I now turn to consider briefly how it informs two related conversations about Jesus in film, and religion in Indian cinema.

3. Jesus in Film

The critical study of Jesus films first emerged in tandem with studies of film, religion, and theology, representations of Jesus in film, and the demise of the biblical epic. Initially, critics dismissed movies of Jesus' life, especially the early silent films, as 'costume dramas'.¹³¹ Nevertheless, in the last three decades the study of Jesus films has undergone something of a revival. Movies of Jesus' life have attracted the

¹²⁶ Lindvall defines 'Christian films' as 'films made by Christians with a particular goal in mind that relates to the work and ministry of the Church or religious community'. Terry Lindvall, *Sanctuary Cinema: Origins of the Christian Film Industry* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2007), 4.

¹²⁷ Lindvall, *The Silents of God*; Lindvall, *Sanctuary Cinema*.

¹²⁸ Terry Lindvall, 'Hollywood Chronicles: Toward an Intersection of Film History and Church History', in *Reframing Theology and Film*, ed. Robert K. Johnston (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 127, 131.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 132, 137.

¹³⁰ Jolyon Mitchell, 'Emerging Conversations in the Study of Media, Religion and Culture', in *Mediating Religion*, ed. Sophia Marriage and Jolyon Mitchell (London: Continuum, 2003), 342.

¹³¹ Neil P. Hurley, 'Cinematic Transfigurations of Jesus', in *Religion in Film*, ed. Michael Bird and John R. May (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1982), 61.

interest of scholars from a variety of disciplines and spawned a spate of publications, most notably in response to Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).¹³²

Critical discussions about Jesus in film divide neatly into categories: studies of 'Jesus-story' (or Jesus-figure) films and 'Christ-figure' films. According to current convention, this study falls under the first category, designating films that 'narrate the life and ministry of Jesus', or more simply, 'represent Jesus himself'.¹³³ The latter present 'a more contemporary story in which characters, events, and details recall—but do not narrate—the gospel story of Jesus'.¹³⁴ Phillip Saville's *The Gospel of John* (2003) is perhaps the latest and most comprehensive exemplar of the first category, whereas the protagonists of *Superman* (1978) and *Shane* (1953) are often used to illustrate the second.¹³⁵ In the interest of clarity and brevity, the terms 'Jesus film' or 'Jesus-figure film' will hereafter be used interchangeably with reference to movies defined above as 'Jesus-story' films.

Critical attention to Jesus films emerged in the shadows of two related streams of scholarship. On the one hand, attempts to theorize and identify Jesus-figures and Christ-figures in Western literature mid-twentieth-century reflected a 'thrust' to find correlations between literature and theology.¹³⁶ These were

¹³² On the latter, see by way of introduction, S. Brent Plate, *Re-Viewing the Passion: Mel Gibson's Film and Its Critics* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Kathleen E. Corley and Robert L. Webb, eds., *Jesus and Mel Gibson's the Passion of the Christ: The Film, the Gospels and the Claims of History* (London: Continuum, 2004).

¹³³ W. Barnes Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 1997), vii; Peter Malone, 'Jesus on Our Screens', in *New Image of Religious Film*, ed. John R. May (London: Sheed & Ward, 1997), 59. Hereafter, I will refer to *Karunamayudu* as a Jesus-story film as defined here or as a Jesus film. For a more extensive list of related sources, see fn. 177 below.

¹³⁴ Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies*, vii. Since Peter Malone first articulated these distinctions in 1988 they have become the dominant model. See Peter Malone, *Movie Christs and Anti-Christs* (Sydney: Parish Ministry Publications: 1988). For more recent examples, see Lloyd Baugh, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997); Anton Karl Koslovic, 'The Structural Characteristics of the Cinematic Christ-Figure', *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* <http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art8-cinematicchrist.html> (accessed 15 May 2005).

¹³⁵ Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) was released a year later, but its status as a bona fide Jesus film is sometimes contested on the grounds that it only features the last twelve hours of Jesus' life before his crucifixion. See, respectively, Anton Karl Koslovic, 'Superman as Christ-Figure: The American Pop Culture Movie Messiah', *Journal of Religion and Film* 6, no. 1 (2002), <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/superman.htm> (accessed 24 September 2007); Baugh, 157-171. Parallels between these categories and the 'Jesus of history' and the 'Christ of faith' associated with historical criticism in nineteenth-century scholarship are not accidental. The parallel, however, should not be overestimated. Peter Malone suggests that said distinction, 'is not at all useful in achieving an understanding of Jesus-figures'. Malone, 'Jesus on Our Screens', 59.

¹³⁶ Edwin S. Gaustad, Darlene Miller, and Allison Stokes, 'Religion in America', *American Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (1979): 266.

complemented on the other hand by attempts to theorize and articulate the relationship between film, religion, and theology in an increasingly secularized society.¹³⁷ I suggest that concerns and assumptions shared by contributing scholars in both conversations made it difficult, initially, for critics to take movies of Jesus' life seriously.

Neil Hurley, who had already published two books concerned with film's relationship to theology and culture, fused these two critical trajectories in his quest for 'Cinematic Transfigurations of Jesus'.¹³⁸ An underlying assumption in his previous works was that films are expressions of dynamics at work beneath the surface of the human experience. The first volume presupposed a 'religious transcendence in some form as a constant of man, society and culture', and therefore set out to identify cinematic theologies in popular films.¹³⁹ In the second, Hurley argued that movies, 'as a global image of the deepest aspirations of the species', have the power to release 'the best possible self among the latent personalities in each of us'.¹⁴⁰ In John Lyden's view, it was a case of 'classical Catholicism' attempting to affirm a kind of 'natural theology' in film as a preparation for Christian values.¹⁴¹

Hurley's discussion of Jesus in film was built on similar premises. Following the example set by literary scholar Theodore Ziolkowski in his *Fictional Transfigurations of Jesus*, Hurley argued that in an increasingly secularized culture, it was still possible to find formal echoes of 'Gospel material' in the cinematic narratives of Western culture.¹⁴² This was a fairly common critical presupposition at the time. As literary scholar Robert Detweiler had put it, 'The Christ of faith and the traditional Christ story supply the best known, most viable body of material for the expression of meaning in Western culture'.¹⁴³

¹³⁷ For example, Cooper and Skrade; Hurley, *Theology through Film*.

¹³⁸ Hurley, *Theology through Film*; Hurley, *The Reel Revolution: A Film Primer on Liberation*; Hurley, 'Cinematic Transfigurations of Jesus'.

¹³⁹ Hurley, *Theology through Film*, 8.

¹⁴⁰ Hurley, *The Reel Revolution: A Film Primer on Liberation*, xi, 164.

¹⁴¹ Lyden, 23.

¹⁴² Hurley, 'Christ-Transfigurations in Film: Notes on a Meta-Genre', 64.

¹⁴³ Note the emphasis on the Christ of faith. Robert Detweiler, 'Christ and the Christ Figure in American Fiction', *Christian Scholar* 47, no. (1964): 113. Cf. Theodore Ziolkowski, *Fictional Transfigurations of Jesus* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 12-13. As Northrop Frye put it: 'Western literature has been more influenced by the Bible than by any other book'. Herman

Ziolkowski argued that echoes of the Gospels could be identified in Western literature by focusing on the parallel 'structure of action' in literary narratives, not just casual inter-textualities or thematic allusions.¹⁴⁴ Similarly, Hurley asserted that there was an identifiable meta-genre in Western cinema, marked by characters and plots with strong 'formal patterns of resemblance' to the Gospels, not the 'theological substance of the life of Jesus'.¹⁴⁵ He was careful to emphasize, however, that these transfigurations did not include 'the silent celluloid costume dramas that recreated the Gospel narratives'.¹⁴⁶ Cecil B. DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1927) was ruled out, as was George Stevens's 'extravagant biblical epic', *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965).¹⁴⁷

Hurley's disregard for Jesus biopics may have had something to do with their similarity to fictionalized biographies of Jesus, which Ziolkowski had described previously as 'modern apocrypha', occupying territory 'between scholarship, fiction, and literary forgery'.¹⁴⁸ These renditions of Jesus' life could, in turn, be traced to Ernest Renan's *The Life of Jesus*—which Ziolkowski described as 'in one sense a trivialization or skillful popularization of three decades of serious New Testament scholarship in Germany'.¹⁴⁹ Detweiler, who was also influential in Hurley's approach to Jesus in film, published a similar assessment of such novels:

As history they assume too much and as fiction they do not assume enough; therefore, as religious aids they become detrimental, for they substitute a mixture of truth and fabrication in place of the New Testament witness of faith.¹⁵⁰

Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism. Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 14. For a critical review of such efforts, see Gaustad, Miller, and Stokes, *Religion in America*: 266.

¹⁴⁴ Ziolkowski, 8. More fully, 'By analogy, we are concerned here with novels in which the life of Jesus has been wholly secularized: it prefigures the life of a fictional character to such an extent that it determines the structure of entire episodes . . . or, indeed, of entire novels', 11.

¹⁴⁵ Hurley, 'Cinematic Transfigurations of Jesus', 62.

¹⁴⁶ He mentions Thomas Ince's *Civilization* (1915), D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1917), Fred Nibo's *Ben Hur* (1925) and Cecil B. DeMille's *[The] King of Kings* (192[6]), Hurley, 'Christ-Transfigurations in Film: Notes on a Meta-Genre', 61.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 61-62.

¹⁴⁸ Ziolkowski, 13.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁵⁰ Detweiler was referring particularly to Fulton Oursler's *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1957), on which George Stevens's later movie by the same name was based. The one major exception Detweiler

Since a number of Jesus films and Roman/biblical epics were inspired by religious fiction of the sort just described it was difficult for some critics to take them seriously.

Hurley's apprehensions were shared by James Wall, a film critic for *Christian Century* who in 1970 predicted the demise of the biblical spectacular. Wall based his claim on an increasing secularity in American culture, a declining population with sufficient Bible knowledge or 'religious presuppositions' to make sense of the epic tales, a cultural aversion to didactic movies, and a 'secular man' in search of meaning 'within the framework of his own lived existence'.¹⁵¹ If Wall thought that biblical spectacles were passé because their narrative was inaccessible to the American population, Paul Schrader took them to task for their style.¹⁵² In *Transcendental Style in Film*, Schrader argued for a 'spare' approach to filmmaking that would facilitate encounters with the Holy, especially through cinematic 'stasis'.¹⁵³ Such a style, he argued, involved ruthlessly 'eliminating (or nearly eliminating) those elements which were primarily expressive of human experience'.¹⁵⁴ In his view, epic films, including movies of Jesus' life, were too overt in their efforts to 'evoke the appropriate emotions'.¹⁵⁵ Schrader argued that their producers operated under the mistaken notion that since film was associated with realism they could make the spiritual real by putting spiritual content on film.¹⁵⁶ By contrast, as German film critic Peter Hasenberg had observed, the tensions of the human experience replaced religious symbolism or themes as the predominant locus for the 'religious' dynamic of

acknowledged was Jim Bishop's *The Day Christ Died* (1957) Robert Detweiler, 'Christ in American Religious Fiction', *Journal of Bible and Religion* 32, no. 1 (1964): 9-10.

¹⁵¹ James M. Wall, 'Biblical Spectaculars and Secular Man', in *Celluloid and Symbols*, ed. John Charles Cooper and Carl Skrade (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 52, 60. For a discussion of other factors that shaped attitudes to the epics, see Babington and Evans, 7-8.

¹⁵² Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972), 4.

¹⁵³ Ibid.; Paul Schrader, 'The Transcendental Style on Film (1972)', in *The Religion and Film Reader*, ed. Jolyon Mitchell and S. Brent Plate (New York and London: Routledge, 2007), 181.

¹⁵⁴ Schrader, 'The Transcendental Style on Film (1972)', 176.

¹⁵⁵ Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 4. In my view, Schrader's understanding of transcendental style is elitist. Although he criticizes certain producers of attempting to manipulate viewers, Schrader imposes on critics a narrow set of criteria for identifying an ideal, religious cinematic encounter. Furthermore, he does not take into account what viewers might consider to be religious experience.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 162-163.

celluloid narratives.¹⁵⁷ Alternatively, as Michael Bird argued, film could function as 'hierophany', a manifestation of the divine in the midst of humanity's struggle.¹⁵⁸

As Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) has most recently demonstrated, Wall, Schrader and Hurley have not had the last word. The discussion of Jesus in film has generated a small publishing industry of its own. Less than a decade after Wall's pronouncement, Richard Campbell and Bruce Pitts published *The Bible on Film: A Checklist, 1897-1980*, which contained references to at least fifty 'screen adaptations' of the story of Jesus.¹⁵⁹ Peter Malone's *Movie Christs and AntiChrists* (1988) followed soon after, featuring commentary on hundreds of films and issues related to the representation of Christ on the silver screen.¹⁶⁰ Roy Kinnard and Tim Davis's *Divine Images* (1992) featured screenshots and production details for all the major Jesus films as well as references to more obscure ones, including a number produced after 1970.¹⁶¹ Gerald Forshey, Bruce Babington, and Peter Evans, may be credited with reinvigorating analysis of the 'Jesus cycle' by exploring the cultural significance of Jesus on screen.¹⁶² Lloyd Baugh's *Imaging the Divine* was a detailed examination of the narrative and theological challenges involved with producing Jesus films and discerning Christ-figures in popular film.¹⁶³ Peter Fraser's *Images of the Passion: The Sacramental Mode in Film* reflected his attempt to approach the analysis of the Passion in film by looking for 'the incarnational gesture at the film's centre'.¹⁶⁴

Other works on Jesus movies include W. Barnes Tatum's *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years* (1997), written in the spirit of the quest for the historical Jesus.¹⁶⁵ Richard Stern, Clayton Jefford and Guerric Debona's *Savior on*

¹⁵⁷ Hasenberg, 52-55.

¹⁵⁸ Michael Bird, 'Film as Hierophany', in *Religion in Film*, ed. John R. May and Michael Bird (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 4.

¹⁵⁹ Richard H. Campbell and Michael R. Pitts, *The Bible on Film: A Checklist, 1897-1980* (Metuchen, NJ; London: Scarecrow, 1981), vii.

¹⁶⁰ Malone, *Movie Christs and Anti-Christs*.

¹⁶¹ Roy Kinnard and Tim Davis, *Divine Images* (New York: Citadel Press, 1992).

¹⁶² Forshey, chapter 6. The precedent inaugurated by these authors is found in a number of works listed below.

¹⁶³ Baugh.

¹⁶⁴ Peter Fraser, *Images of the Passion: The Sacramental Mode in Film* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), 2.

¹⁶⁵ Tatum.

the Silver Screen (1999) was a viewing and discussion guide designed to help readers reconsider their understanding of Jesus using introductory tools of film criticism.¹⁶⁶ Christopher Deacy's *Screen Christologies: Redemption and the Medium of Film* (2001) explored themes of redemption in *film noir* and the work of Martin Scorsese, as well as the possibility of film as a site for rethinking Christology in human terms.¹⁶⁷ Richard Walsh's *Reading the Gospels in the Dark: Portrayals of Jesus in Film* (2003) combined cultural studies and textual criticism in a detailed and rigorous exploration of Jesus on screen, especially within the 'sacred precinct' of American individualism.¹⁶⁸ In a similar vein, Stephenson Humphries-Brooks argued that 'by looking at "Jesus" in film, we can gain insight into what the *Cinematic Savior* can teach us about the distinctives of American culture'.¹⁶⁹ Paul V. M. Flesher and Robert Torrey's *Film and Religion* devoted four chapters to the ways in which Jesus's story has been employed to address contemporary cultural issues.¹⁷⁰ Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) touched off a mini-genre in its own right that has included analyses of the film from just about every angle one could imagine.¹⁷¹ Adele Reinhartz' most recent *Jesus in Hollywood* was framed by the assumption that films can tell us something about what it is that we believe.¹⁷² Of particular interest to Reinhartz is what the 'Jesus biopic' tradition reveals about North American perspectives on the Jews and women.¹⁷³ Her interrogation of how particular characters in the Jesus story are depicted is complemented by a number of essays by William R. Telford, Richard Walsh and Kim Paffenroth.¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁶ Richard C. Stern, Clayton N. Jefford, and Guerric DeBona, *Savior on the Silver Screen* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999).

¹⁶⁷ Deacy, *Faith in Film: Religious Themes in Contemporary Cinema*.

¹⁶⁸ Walsh, *Reading the Gospels in the Dark*, 175.

¹⁶⁹ Stephenson Humphries-Brooks, *Cinematic Savior: Hollywood's Making of the American Christ* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2006), 4. Italics mine.

¹⁷⁰ Flesher and Torrey. Ch 5-8.

¹⁷¹ For a review of a number of the more popular books, see Plate, 'Timothy K. Beal and others'.

¹⁷² Adele Reinhartz, *Jesus of Hollywood* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 7, 256.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁷⁴ Kim Paffenroth, 'Film Depictions of Judas' <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/judas.htm> (accessed 2 Feb 2005); William R. Telford, 'His blood be upon us, and our children': The Treatment of Jews and Judaism in the Christ Film', in *Cinéma Divinité*, ed. Eric Christianson, Peter Francis, and William R. Telford (London: SCM, 2005); William R. Telford, 'The Two Faces of Betrayal: The Characterization of Peter and Judas in the Biblical Epic or Christ Film', in *Cinéma Divinité*, ed. Eric Christianson, Peter Francis, and William R. Telford (London: SCM, 2005); See also Richard Walsh on Barabbas in film.

The above list of sources does not exhaust the scholarship on Jesus in film.¹⁷⁵ Nevertheless, it provides a sufficient cross-section of the English literature on the topic to confirm that the literature on Jesus in film suffers the same deficiencies that have marked the broader discourse on film, religion, and theology. Again the subject matter has been decidedly Eurocentric.¹⁷⁶ Not only is much of the literature in English, it has been concerned almost exclusively with Western—and particularly Hollywood—movies about Jesus' life.¹⁷⁷ A quick glance at the encyclopaedic treatments of the Jesus film genre bears this out.¹⁷⁸ There is no substantial body of literature devoted to non-Western Jesus films, despite trends in the broader discussion of religion and film to move beyond Western borders.¹⁷⁹ Even Adele Reinhartz' most recent and instructive *Jesus in Hollywood* failed to acknowledge non-Western films, despite claiming to discuss the representation of Jesus in 'other global film industries'.¹⁸⁰ Minor exceptions to such lacunae include Freek L. Bakker's essay on Indian Jesus movies and a made-for-television documentary *The Passion: Films, Faith and Fury* (2006) that mentions *Daya Sagar* (Hindi title for *Karunamayudu*).¹⁸¹ Nevertheless, the availability of published material on non-Western Jesus movies has remained limited.¹⁸²

Apart from its historical value, this study also contributes to the slowly accumulating archive concerned with the reception of Jesus films. By no means as

Richard Walsh, 'Barabbas Rewrites the Cross: Parody or Parable?', in *Images of the Word: Hollywood's Bible and Beyond*, ed. David Shepherd (Society of Biblical Literature, 2008).

¹⁷⁵ A myriad sources are available in online journals and blogs. See, for example, Koslovic, 'Superman as Christ-Figure: The American Pop Culture Movie Messiah'; Koslovic, 'The Structural Characteristics of the Cinematic Christ-Figure'; Matt Page's Bible Films blog: <http://biblefilms.blogspot.com>

¹⁷⁶ There is a currently a movement away from the Eurocentricism of the literature and its interest in the cinematic Jesus. This study stands in awkward relationship to the former by virtue of its subject, even though sharing a similar impulse. Hughes and Meyer, 150.

¹⁷⁷ Unfortunately, a considerable body of literature exists in other European languages that has not been invoked in the English discussion. A visit to the following website demonstrates how much has been missed: www.film-und-theologie.de

¹⁷⁸ Campbell and Pitts; Kinnard and Davis.

¹⁷⁹ S. Brent Plate, *Religion, Art, and Visual Culture: A Cross-Cultural Reader* (New York; Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002); Plate, ed. *Representing Religion in World Cinema*.

¹⁸⁰ Reinhartz, *Jesus of Hollywood*, 11.

¹⁸¹ Freek L. Bakker, 'Shanti Sandesham, a New Jesus Film Produced in India: Indian Christology in Pictures', *Exchange* 36, no. (2007); Rory Wheeler, 'The Passion: Films, Faith & Fury', (UK: 2006).

¹⁸² Peter Malone's forthcoming *Screen Jesus* is meant to discuss the representation of Jesus in global cinema, but publication details are not readily available.

extensive as Martin Barker et al's cross-cultural study of the reception of Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, it nevertheless has informed our understanding of the significance of Jesus films in cultures outside America.¹⁸³ The potential significance of such a study is highlighted by the recognition that it was a movie of Jesus' life that purportedly inspired the Indian film industry.¹⁸⁴

4. Religion in Indian Cinema

Since I will discuss Indian cinema at greater length in a separate chapter, my comments here will be brief and introductory, designed to indicate how this study contributes to discussions of religion in Indian cinema. It is commonly recognized that religion and cinema have been 'inseparably linked in Indian culture' beginning with D.G. Phalke's encounter with a Jesus film in Bombay in 1910.¹⁸⁵ More particularly, it has been argued that 'Hindu religious traditions and practices', not Christianity, 'mark the content, structure and dominant moods of Indian films'.¹⁸⁶ One need only observe films as diverse in form as Satyajit Ray's neo-realist *Apu Trilogy*, the mythologicals of Telugu cinema, and recent Bollywood cross-over movies such as *Lagaan* (2001), *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002) and recent Oscar winner, *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) to see evidence of said influence.

Nevertheless, it would be presumptuous to assume that the coordinates of cinema, religion, and theology in India have direct parallels in the Western discussion of film and religion. In their helpful introduction to Indian popular cinema, Wimal Dissanayake and K. Moti Gokulsing have issued a pertinent caution for critics of Indian films:

¹⁸³ Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs, *Watching the Lord of the Rings: Tolkien's World Audiences* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

¹⁸⁴ D.G. Phalke; Dossier; Swadeshi Moving Pictuers', *Continuum* 2, no. 1 (1988-89): 55; B.M. Malhotra, 'Dadasheb Phalke: The Father of Indian Cinema', *India Perspectives* March (2004): 22.

¹⁸⁵ K. Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake, *Indian Popular Cinema: A Narrative of Cultural Change*, Revised and Updated ed. (Stoke on Trent, UK: Trentham Books, 2004), 55. Ashish Rajadhyaksha, 'The Phalke Era: Conflict of Traditional Form and Modern Technology', *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 14-15 (1987): 47-49. Phalke has long been recognized as 'the father of Indian cinema'.

¹⁸⁶ Gokulsing and Dissanayake, 56.

When you go to see an Indian popular film, you must do so in the right frame of mind: understand that what you are seeing is not a realistic, western-type film with a linear narrative but a film that conforms to a different set of aesthetic imperatives.¹⁸⁷

Any temptation to make Indian cinema in a Western image can be avoided further by attending to some of the contextual characteristics of the industry. Consider that representatives of Hindu and Muslim communities, not Christians, have been at the helm of India's industry for most of its history.¹⁸⁸ Furthermore, scholars have long acknowledged that Indian cinema has from the start 'dramatically displayed the interplay of the global and the local within its discourses' in a manner unfamiliar to the West.¹⁸⁹ D.G. Phalke's encounter with cinema and his ensuing vision for an Indian cinematic industry is a case in point.¹⁹⁰ For the purpose of this study it is also significant that in contrast to the Western context where film has often been placed in dialogue with highly ordered expressions of theological reflection, theological reflection in India—however nuanced—has yet to develop as great a concern for dogmatic and systematic theology.¹⁹¹

Examinations of the relationship between film, religion, and theology in India have been inhibited further by the focus of the discussion at this time—at least in the English literature. Critical treatments of religion in Indian cinema published in English have not been as numerous as discussions of religion and Western cinema, often taking the form of single articles or chapters tucked into books concerned with broader themes. Not until the recent publication of Rachel Dwyer's *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* could one find a single book dedicated to the topic, a lacuna attributable in part to the tendency among contributors to focus on

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 31.

¹⁸⁸ Dwyer, 134-136.

¹⁸⁹ Gokulsing and Dissanayake, 2.

¹⁹⁰ Wimal Dissanayake, 'Cultural Identity and Asian Cinema: An Introduction', in *Cinema and Cultural Identity: Reflections on Films from Japan, India, and China*, ed. Wimal Dissanayake (Lanham: University Press of America, 1988), 1.

¹⁹¹ As Parimal G. Patil has observed in response to Francis Clooney, not only are there 'very few Hindu institutions that correspond to the diverse academic and nonacademic institutions in which Christian theology is practiced today', it is only those Hindu intellectuals 'capable of writing in the languages and style of the Euro-American academy' who are likely to engage in comparative theology of the sort proposed by Western theologians. Francis Xavier Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 186.

popular film's political significance in a modern state.¹⁹² The widespread popularity in the 1990s of the TV serial *Ramayan* suggests that the forms of visual storytelling made possible by screen technologies have remained a medium for 'the expression of individual and collective religious experience' as well as cultural and political discourse.¹⁹³ Furthermore, if Hollywood films have dominated the Western discussion, Dwyer has observed that most scholarship on Indian cinema to date—her own book included—has focused primarily on Hindi films.¹⁹⁴ Much less attention has been given either to South Indian cinema or to its religious dynamics, save the well documented relationship in South India between film, religion, and politics.¹⁹⁵ By focusing on an Indian movie of Jesus' life made in South India, therefore, this study offsets the hegemony of 'Hinduism and Bollywoodcentrism' in the literature on religion and Indian cinema.¹⁹⁶ A fruitful parallel between the two discussions could be explored further in terms of the alternative definitions and perceptions of film as myth, or film as a form of narrative theology. Additionally, both discourses, that is, the Indian and Western, could benefit from sustained attention to film reception, and especially the reception of Jesus films.¹⁹⁷ By attending to the ways in which people, including Indian viewers, have responded to this film, I have therefore taken up the challenge of 'integrating their perspectives and theories into film studies' and especially the discussion of film, religion, and theology.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹² Ravi Vasudevan, *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema* (New Delhi and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 2.

¹⁹³ Philip Lutgendorf, 'All in the (Raghu) Family: A Video Epic in Cultural Context', in *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia*, ed. Lawrence A. Babb and Susan Snow Wadley (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 249.

¹⁹⁴ Dwyer, 10.

¹⁹⁵ See Sara Dickey, 'The Politics of Adulation: Cinema and the Production of Politicians in South India', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no. 2 (1993); Duncan Forrester, 'Factions and Filmstars: Tamil Nadu Politics since 1971', *Asian Survey* 16, no. 3 (1976); Vaasanthi, *Cut-Outs, Caste and Cine Stars* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2006).

¹⁹⁶ An allusion to S. Brent Plate's comments about 'Hollywoodcentrism' in the literature. Plate, ed., 9.

¹⁹⁷ On the reception of Hindi films, see Shakuntala Banaji, *Reading 'Bollywood': The Young Audience and Hindi Films* (Houndmills, England; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Steve Darné, *Movies, Masculinity, and Modernity: An Ethnography of Men's Filmgoing in India* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000).

¹⁹⁸ Ashis Nandy, 'Notes Towards an Agenda for the Next Generation of Film Theorists in India', *South Asian Popular Culture* 1, no. 1 (2003): 84.

5. Conclusion

This overview of the literature concerned with film's relationship to religion and theology, with studies of Jesus in film, and with studies of religion in Indian cinema, has highlighted some dominant characteristics of those broader discussions. Until recently in the West, Christian theological categories and the concerns of Christian theologians have dominated those conversations. By contrast, studies of religion in Indian cinema have evolved in a context where Hinduism, not Christianity, has been the primary cultural force and where the field of film criticism has been dominated by political rather than theological concerns. Although far from exhaustive in scope, this overview has also demonstrated how recent research trajectories in the field have developed in response to the formative trajectories in the field. Those developments have included efforts to incorporate a wider range of religious traditions in the discussion, to employ analytical approaches that exceed the concerns and methods of literary criticism, and to appreciate the influence of theology on the history of cinema.¹⁹⁹ Additionally, this overview has drawn attention to the dearth of reception analyses in the history of the discussion as a whole and the general need for more attention to film's role in the mediation and remediation of religion.

By analyzing *Karunamayudu*'s journey from production to reception, therefore, this study reflects a number of recent developments in the field and makes a modest response to lacunae in the discussion. By virtue of the film's content and the context in which it was produced and continues to be viewed, this study nudges the discussion of film, religion, and theology beyond Western borders to engage religious traditions other than Christianity. It also provides glimpses of the ways in which religious and theological traditions have influenced the film's appropriation and reception in daily life. Furthermore, instead of analyzing *Karunamayudu* through the lens of a particular aesthetic or theological framework, this attempt to construct and analyse *Karunamayudu*'s content and history turns on three primary questions: What religious traditions and experiences have informed *Karunamayudu*'s production, content, distribution and reception? How has this film been appropriated by distributors, producers and viewers? How does such an understanding of the

¹⁹⁹ Lindvall, 'Hollywood Chronicles: Toward an Intersection of Film History and Church History', 127.

history of *Karunamayudu* (1978) contribute to our understanding of the tangled relationship of film, religion, and theology? In the next chapter, I discuss how I went about answering them.

CHAPTER TWO

Methodology

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter I highlighted a number of lacunae in the literature on film, religion, and theology to date. I also indicated that the conditions in which *Karunamayudu* was produced and continues to be screened vary considerably from those in relation to which most of the Western discussion of film, religion, and theology has developed. Because the film's history spans both Western and Indian contexts it raises a number of important questions for the increasingly global discussion of film, religion, and theology. The three I have chosen to focus on are: What religious traditions and experiences have informed *Karunamayudu's* production, content, distribution and reception? How has this film been appropriated by distributors, producers and viewers? How does this approach to the history of *Karunamayudu* (1978), arguably India's best-known Jesus film, contribute to our understanding of the tangled relationship of film, religion, and theology?¹ In this chapter I explain how I went about answering those questions and the methodological challenges and approaches involved. I begin by reviewing the genesis of my central research questions, research objectives, the methodologies I employed, and the key influences on my approach. Then I review the ethical considerations and logistical constraints that marked the process and conclude with some introductory comments about this study's significance and potential contributions to ongoing research in the field.

¹ At least five movies of Jesus' life have been produced for commercial cinema in South India: *Mulla Kireetam* ('Crown of Thorns'; c. 1960s), *Jesus* (1973), *Karunamayudu* ('Man of Compassion'; 1979), *Santi Sandesham* (2004), *Mulla Kireetam* ('Crown of Thorns'; 2006). These do not include movies in which Jesus makes a cameo appearance in other narratives. As I will argue further in Chapter 3, *Karunamayudu* has remained somewhat of a benchmark against which other movies of Jesus' life are often judged in India.

2. Development of the research questions

The three research questions around which this study turns were shaped primarily by personal experiences that alerted me to the contingent relationship of media, religion, and culture. These experiences were further refined through reflection on the significance scholars have attributed to Jesus films.

2.1 Personal background

The inspiration for this project did not derive initially from a close reading of the literature on film and religion or from a particular passion for film. Rather, it grew out of sustained reflection on two closely related questions: How do people in non-Western cultures interpret movies of Jesus' life that have been produced in the West? Alternatively, how do Western movies of Jesus' life shape non-Western viewers' perceptions of Jesus? Those questions, in turn, were formed in response to a number of personal experiences and accounts of media reception. I mention three by way of introduction.

As a teenager in West Africa I developed an interest in photography, but quickly learned to point my lens with care, recognizing that some subjects might assume that I was attempting to capture their spirits. Furthermore, my father, a Western Christian missionary, often carried a hand-cranked record player with him into remote areas so that he could play sermons in the local dialect. On one occasion, and much to his surprise, he was suspected of witchcraft; the villagers wanted to know where he was hiding the man whose voice they heard from the box. In another instance, he sold a Bible in the marketplace to a Muslim man who was keen to locate the name of Moses' mother in the text. Upon finding the passage, the man clipped it out and attached it to an amulet on his wrist.² At the time my father was unsure of his customer's intentions, but an account from the writings of Samuel Ajai Crowther, the first African bishop in the Anglican Church, provides a clue. Crowther records that,

² Both of these accounts were corroborated in personal conversation with the author's father on 17 July, 2008.

an old Mohammedan priest had asked for a copy of an Arabic Bible for a long time, but it was not given him from fear that he would make bad use of it, in making charms from it as they did from the Koran.³

A number of years passed before Crowther agreed to give the imam a copy of the Bible and then only under strict orders to use it for instruction.⁴

My interest in the relationship between film, religion, and theology grew out of a general interest in the influence of religio-cultural, or theological traditions on the way people responded to media in each of these scenarios. Crowther's anecdote posed especially pertinent questions about the agency or 'use-value' of sacred texts and how those values are regulated and interpreted in religious communities.⁵ During a subsequent graduate seminar about the Bible on screen I was prompted to consider in particular the reflexive relationship between movies of Jesus' life and viewers' perceptions of him.⁶ It occurred to me that this was a pertinent question, given the ubiquity with which such films have been employed worldwide in Christian evangelism. Campus Crusade for Christ International's (CCCI's) 'JESUS film', for example, is one of the most widely screened movies of Jesus' life due to its appropriation for such purposes.⁷

A survey of the literature on Jesus films confirmed my suspicions that few scholars or practitioners of Jesus film evangelism had reflected critically either on the history of CCCI's film, or its reception in multiple cultures.⁸ Noteworthy

³ Samuel Adjai Crowther, *Experiences with Heathens and Mohammedans* (London: SPCK, 1892), 24.

⁴ Ibid. Thanks to Amir Hussain for his insightful comments about this account.

⁵ Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Film: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton and Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1992), 3. In Marxist or materialist criticism, 'use-value' refers to the usefulness of an object as opposed to its exchange value.

⁶ The seminar, entitled *Scripture on the Silver Screen*, was supervised by Dr David Shepherd, Briercrest Seminary, 2003.

⁷ Commonly referred to in CCCI promotional materials as the 'JESUS film', the movie was first released by Warner Bros. as *Jesus* (1979). Co-directors were John Krish and Peter Sykes. Producer was John Heyman. Since acquiring rights to the film, CCCI has subsequently edited the film to a running time of approximately 1.5 hrs and dubbed it into over 1000 languages. According to the latest statistics on CCCI's website, it has been viewed over six billion times. These comments derived from John Dart, 'The Making of Jesus: An Evangelist and an Unhappy Producer', *Christian Century* 118, no. 18 (2001); www.jesusfilm.org

⁸ My sense that this was a fertile field of inquiry was informed by the following claim: 'There has been relatively little in-depth study of the effects of media in mission, and few controlled experiments. . . .

exceptions included Tom Steffen's essay, 'Don't Show the JESUS film If . . . ' and an unpublished Master's dissertation that examined the effects of the movie *Jesus* (1979) on attitudes and behaviours among the Gwembe Tonga of Zambia.⁹ At the time, Esther Peperkamp had not published her insightful analysis of CCCI's film, and I had yet to encounter Freek L. Bakker's introduction to Indian Jesus films.¹⁰ In the face of such lacunae, I determined initially to conduct a comparative reception analysis of CCCI's film in a number of non-Western locations.

India seemed an appropriate site to begin, given the country's established cinematic industry. In the course of mapping a strategy for a reception analysis of CCCI's JESUS film in India, however, I was introduced to *Karunamayudu* (1978) an Indian movie of Jesus' life.¹¹ The more I learned about Indian cinema and *Karunamayudu*, the more fascinated I became with the religious, theological and cultural dynamics that intersected in the film's history.¹² Despite its established exhibition history in India *Karunamayudu* has attracted little critical attention, even among scholars with an interest in non-Western representations of Jesus.¹³ Furthermore, I recognized in the story of the film an opportunity to explore a wider range of intersecting contingencies in film's relationship to theology and religion than a reception analysis alone had to offer. When logistical challenges encountered during my pilot study in India called into question the viability of conducting the sort of in-depth reception analysis I had envisioned originally, I opted to focus on the history of *Karunamayudu* alone.

The lack of research in Christian media has resulted in counting media activities rather than measuring media results'. Viggo B. Sogaard, 'Media', in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker, 2000), 610.

⁹ T. Steffen, 'Don't Show the Jesus Film', *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (1993): 272-275; Cathy Lee Mansfield, 'Cognitive and Attitudinal Changes Following the Viewing of the Jesus Film among the Gwembe Tonga of Zambia' (M.A. Thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1984).

¹⁰ Freek L. Bakker, 'The Image of Jesus Christ in the Jesus Films Used in Missionary Work', *Exchange* 33, no. 4 (2004); Freek L. Bakker, 'Shanti Sandesham', n. 185; Esther Peperkamp, 'Being a Christian in the Catholic Way: Protestant and Catholic Versions of the Jesus Films and the Evangelization of Poland', *Postscripts* 1.2 / 1.3, no. (2005): 351-374.

¹¹ Thanks to David Shepherd for introducing me to this film.

¹² Ashish Rajadhyaksha, 'The Phalke Era: Conflict of Traditional Form and Modern Technology', *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 14-15 (1987): 47-78.

¹³ Prabhu Guptara, 'Religion Has Shaped Indian Film', *Action*, January (1980): 19-22. Bakker's work is a recent exception. The film has also attracted some attention for its inclusion in a recent documentary about Jesus in Hollywood. Rory Wheeler, 'The Passion: Films, Faith & Fury', (UK: 2006). Christopher Coelho, 'How Hindus Filmed the Life of Christ', *Action*, January (1980): 16-19; R. S. Sugirtharajah, 'Indian Cowboy, Hindu Christ', *One World* 49 (1979): 18-19.

2.2 Narrowing the question

By way of introduction to the sorts of contingencies with which this study is concerned, I discuss briefly two separate claims about the significance of Jesus films.¹⁴ In a critical review of Jesus on the silver screen, William R. Telford asserted that

given its popularity, the Christ film is arguably the most significant medium through which popular culture this century has absorbed its knowledge of the Gospel story and formed its impression of Christianity's founder.¹⁵

This claim not only affirmed the potential significance of this study; it also begged for interrogation: Are Christ films as influential as Telford suggests? How might one go about testing that claim? To which popular culture is he referring? What about contexts where cinema is a minor aspect of daily life, or alternatively, where Christianity is not the predominant reference point for culture and religious practice? Furthermore, how do people go about absorbing knowledge of the Gospel story or forming impressions of Jesus in the company of film? What might those acts of appropriation look like in daily experience?

Although proponents of Jesus film evangelism have also endorsed the significance of Jesus films as a source of knowledge, they have tended to emphasize the efficacy of such movies. CCCI's 'JESUS film', for example, has been referred to widely as the most powerful evangelistic tool ever produced.¹⁶ Not only has it purportedly communicated the message of Jesus to illiterate viewers, advocates of CCCI's film have praised it for being efficient, cost-effective, able to transcend

¹⁴ 'Jesus film' and 'Christ film' as used here both refer generally to movies of Jesus' life. I will discuss the terminology involved with cinematic representations of Jesus in greater detail below.

¹⁵ William R. Telford, 'Jesus Christ Movie Star: The Depiction of Jesus in the Cinema', in *Explorations in Theology and Film*, ed. Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 122.

¹⁶ See, for example, www.jesusfilm.org; Justin Long, 'Media Evangelism among the Unreached', *Lausanne World Pulse* (February 2006), 33-34.

cultures with little need for acquiring cross-cultural knowledge, and even comparable to the Bible itself.¹⁷

Both Telford and film evangelists have emphasized the significance of Jesus films. Nevertheless, there is a subtle and important difference between their claims. Telford emphasized the Jesus film as a source of information, the significance of which is determined largely by the agency of the viewer. Jesus film evangelists, by contrast, have tended to emphasize the agency of the film itself. Arguably, both treat the film as a kind of text, but their conceptions of how people engage it vary considerably.

Generally speaking, Telford's approach hints at an understanding of media that has much in common with Stuart Hall's model of encoding / decoding that provided the structure for David Morley's study of television audiences in the United Kingdom.¹⁸ Hall developed the thesis that consumers of media products engage with media content in one of at least three ways: by assimilating precisely what the producer intended (preferred reading), adapting it for their own purposes (negotiated reading), or resisting the message by adopting an very different interpretation than supposedly intended (oppositional reading).¹⁹ Telford's terminology of absorption is similar to Hall's category of negotiation.

By contrast, the claims made by Jesus film evangelists have tended to reflect a view of media as neutral conduits that transmit messages from sender to receiver.²⁰ This propensity is most obvious in Jesus film evangelists' tendency to refer to the film as an effective *tool*.²¹ According to this model, the circuit of communication is deemed complete when the message received matches the one intended by the sender. In media studies this understanding of media is commonly referred to as the

¹⁷ Paul Eshleman, *I Just Saw Jesus* (Arrowhead Springs, Calif.: The Jesus Project, 1985), 179; Long, 'Media Evangelism among the Unreached'; Grant R. Richison, 'Biblical Rationale for Translating the Jesus Film for Small Tribes' (Campus Crusade for Christ International, 2004). Similar comments have been made about *Karunamayudu* as well. www.dayspringinternational.org

¹⁸ Dave Morley and British Film Institute, *The Nationwide Audience Structure and Decoding* (London: British Film Institute, 1980).

¹⁹ Stuart Hall, 'Encoding/Decoding', in *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980): 166-176.

²⁰ Paul Eshleman, *I Just Saw Jesus* (Arrowhead Springs, Calif.: The Jesus Project, 1985), 178.

²¹ Italics mine; Long, 'Media Evangelism among the Unreached'.

'hypodermic needle' or 'magic bullet' model because it assumes a relatively passive receiver.²²

Media and culture scholar James Carey has distinguished these alternative theories of communication using the labels of 'ritual' and 'transmission', both of which he argues derive from 'religious attitudes'.²³ Whereas the transmission model defines communication as the transmission of information, a ritual understanding of communication is concerned with 'the representation of shared beliefs' for the purpose of keeping society intact. In Carey's words,

If the archetypal case of communication under a transmission view is the extension of messages across geography for the purpose of control, the archetypal case under a ritual view is the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality.²⁴

The significance of Carey's insight for this study is twofold, for he not only articulates a critical distinction between theories of communication and media, but suggests that those differences can be traced to religious or theological traditions. Carey asserts that an emphasis on communication as transmission derived from an understanding of communication as key to the establishment of God's kingdom on earth. This perspective, in turn, became tangled up with agendas of colonial expansion, industry, and science such that any communication tool perceived to contribute to a better world was sanctioned as a gift from God.²⁵ As already indicated, claims made by advocates of Jesus film evangelism tend to reflect such a perspective. By virtue of his emphasis on the activity of the viewer, it appears that Telford perceives communication more in terms of ritual.

Together with the claims of Telford and the Jesus film evangelists, Carey's thesis provides a theoretical framework for this study's central hypothesis; religious

²² Debra Spitulnik, 'Anthropology and Mass Media', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 22, (1993): 296.

²³ James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, Repr. ed. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 13-22.

²⁴ Ibid., 18.

²⁵ Ibid., 16-17. For an analysis of such reasoning among evangelicals, see Clifford Christians, 'Redemptive Media as the Evangelical's Cultural Task', in Quentin J. Schultze, *American Evangelicals and the Mass Media* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic Books, 1990), 331-356.

and theological traditions can shape our perceptions of communication and media.²⁶ To extrapolate the argument further, theological and religious traditions can influence, and perhaps even clash in, the production, composition, distribution, and reception of films like *Karunamayudu*. A primary agenda for this study, therefore, is to tease out and articulate those negotiations and contingencies using empirical data.

The challenge was to develop strategies for acquiring evidence of those negotiations. Neither Carey nor Telford provided much supporting evidence to demonstrate their claims. By contrast, film evangelists constantly reinforce the efficacy of Jesus films,²⁷ but their reports typically reflect an instrumental view of media and rarely if ever address—or admit—what Stuart Hall would call negotiated or resistant readings of Jesus films. In an effort to avoid either propensity—to advance theories without empirical data, or only submit accounts that support one's theory—I determined to begin by developing as comprehensive a history of *Karunamayudu* as possible. Only then, using evidence acquired through personal observation and conversations with people who had encountered the film in various ways, could I begin to articulate the various religious or theological traditions at work.

The contributions of media and religion scholar Stewart Hoover and his peers were instructive in this regard. Their pioneering sociological analyses of media and religion based at the University of Colorado have been shaped by Hoover's approach expressed below:

Before we [could] look at the big picture of religious meaning, spiritual symbolism, religious and spiritual traditions, religious institutions, religious education, and the relationship of religion to national and global politics, it seemed to me that we should first look at how people, as media consumers and audiences, access, interact with, and make sense of mediated religion.²⁸

²⁶ I have used Carey's model in this instance, and will do so again in chapter 6, because it is helpful for distinguishing major theories of communication and approaches to film. That said, Carey himself admits that the lines between the two approaches can be blurred (22). Furthermore, as Kenneth Cmiel has observed, Carey's analysis is quite biased in that he praises the ritual model and denigrates the transmission model. Kenneth Cmiel, review of *Culture as Communication: Essays on Media and Society* by James Carey, *Theory and Society* 21, no. 2 (1992): 285-290.

²⁷ See, for example, the reports at www.jesusfilm.org

²⁸ Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 264. In addition, I was encouraged by Jolyon Mitchell's observation that historical analyses of media and

Rather than begin with a particular theory, I chose to adopt Hoover's commitment to observation before theorization. That said, I expanded his approach by including a commitment to examining how people engaged at every stage in the film's journey interacted with religious or theological traditions, rather than focusing primarily on reception.

3. Research objectives

To summarize, my primary research objective for this study was not to advocate a particular model of communication or impose a particular theological grid on the narrative or content of *Karunamayudu*. Instead, I set out to construct a 'thickly described' account of the film's journey from production to reception that would shed some light on the various ways in which it had been perceived, and the religious or theological significance that has been attributed to it.²⁹ In turn, I sought to understand how such knowledge might inform ongoing studies of film, religion, and theology. In the next section of this chapter, therefore, I discuss the challenges of making my central research questions researchable.

4. Methodological matters

The primary obstacle I faced in defining the parameters of this study was a lack of models on which to draw, especially related to non-Western contexts. As already

religion, especially in non-Western contexts, remains a fertile field for investigation. Jolyon Mitchell, 'Emerging Conversations in the Study of Media, Religion and Culture', in *Mediating Religion*, ed. Sophia Marriage and Jolyon Mitchell (London: Continuum, 2003), 342; More recently, religious film historian Terry Lindvall has issued a call for 'theologically informed' histories of film. Terry Lindvall, 'Hollywood Chronicles: Toward an Intersection of Film History and Church History', in *Reframing Theology and Film*, ed. Robert K. Johnston (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2007), 127, 131.

²⁹ William A. Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture: The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 15. This approach is similar to Stewart Hoover's comparison of the 'accounts of media' that people offer in contrast to their daily practices. Hoover, 88-94.

noted, Stewart Hoover's sociological studies of media and religion were instructive, but his work has been geared primarily to television in America, not film. Martin Barker et al's comprehensive and cross-cultural reception analysis of *The Lord of the Rings* was not published when this project began.³⁰ Additionally, to the best of my knowledge, critical reception studies of Jesus films—that is, accounts that move beyond film evangelists' invariably positive reports—are quite rare. Notable exceptions include a reception analysis of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* and, as already mentioned, CCCI's *Jesus* film among the Gwembe Tonga.³¹ Likewise, reception studies related to Indian cinema that involve interaction with viewers who are not professionally engaged in film criticism are also in the minority.³² A significant exception is Wimal Dissanayake and Malti Sahai's reception analysis of *Sholay* (1975).³³ Finally, to the best of my knowledge, film critics have rarely followed the life of a single film from its production to reception, and especially not with an interest in its shifting religious significance.³⁴

Although my interests have leaned toward a cultural studies or anthropological interest in film, I also did not want to avoid an analysis of the film itself. Given the paucity of models available for such a comprehensive inquiry, therefore, I pieced together a methodological strategy of my own. The next section of the chapter is therefore dedicated to an explanation of the project's multidisciplinary contours and my rationale for the research techniques I employed.

³⁰ Hoover, 88-94.

³¹ William J. Brown, John D. Keeler, and Terry Lindvall, 'Audience Responses to *the Passion of the Christ*', *Journal of Media and Religion* 6, no. 2 (2007): 87-107; Mansfield. The former was published after my visits to India.

³² That is not to say that viewership and spectatorship in India has not been analyzed. See Subhajit Chatterjee, 'The Divided Object of Desire: A Note on Spectatorship in Indian Cinema,' *Journal of the Moving Image* 2 (2001); Lalitha Gopalan and British Film Institute, *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 2002); Ashish Rajadhyaksha, 'Viewership and Democracy in the Cinema,' in *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*, ed. Ravi S. Vasudevan (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002).

³³ Some noteworthy contributions: Shakuntala Banaji, *Reading 'Bollywood': The Young Audience and Hindi Films* (Basingstoke, England; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Sara Dickey, *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India*, Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology; 92 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Wimal Dissanayake and Malti Sahai, *Sholay, A Cultural Reading* (New Delhi: Wiley Eastern, 1992).

³⁴ One notable exception is John Ramsden, *The Dam Busters* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003).

4.1 Definitions of terms

Key terms in this study are 'theology' and 'religion', or alternatively, 'theological traditions' and 'religious traditions'. In my view, the term 'theology' is not the preserve of Christianity, nor does it refer exclusively to 'the most sophisticated and reflective ways of talking about God'.³⁵ The term 'theology' may also refer to discourses about God or gods in daily life, whether or not those discourses and practices parallel Christian practices or beliefs, or are highly systematized.³⁶ I have used it throughout to refer to 'God-talk' in almost any format, or as defined by any religious tradition.³⁷ Likewise, I have chosen to use the phrase 'theological traditions' to refer to established traditions of talking about God, whether Calvinist doctrines or long standing attitudes about temple statues.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith once asserted that the category of 'religion' was a European creation.³⁸ Furthermore, Talal Asad has argued that efforts to define religion have developed in 'the context of Christian attempts to achieve a coherence in doctrines and practices' and may be understood as 'the historical product of discursive processes'.³⁹ Although I recognize the dangers of imposing essentialist and universal categories on others, I nevertheless submit the need for a definition of religion that can serve as a point of reference for this study. Following David Morgan, therefore, I have adopted Catherine Albanese's definition of religion as 'a system of symbols (creed, code, cultus) by means of which people (a community) orient themselves in the world with reference to both ordinary and extraordinary powers, meanings, and values'.⁴⁰ As Morgan has argued, the value of Albanese's

³⁵ See John Macquarrie, *God-Talk: An Examination of the Language and Logic of Theology* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1967), 11.

³⁶ I recognize that in using the term I am imposing on such discourses a word that most people engaged in them do not use to describe what they are doing. I also recognize that religious traditions can represent a variety of discourses. The practices and beliefs represented by Hinduism for example, whether or not those beliefs are highly articulate or expressed in the form of propositional statements, are so multiple as to defy systematization.

³⁷ Richard H. Davis, for example, speaks of a 'Hindu theological postulate' about images as a reference point for his discussion of images. Davis, 7.

³⁸ Wilfred Cantwell Smith cited in Geoffrey A. Oddie, *Imagining Hinduism* (New Delhi: Sage, 2006), 13.

³⁹ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD, and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 29.

⁴⁰ Catherine Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion*, 3rd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth

definition is that she acknowledges both the 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary' aspects of religious experience or practice.⁴¹ Taxonomies of 'religious experiences' also vary considerably depending on how one perceives religion.⁴² In keeping with Albanese's orientation to the community, however, I determined to only identify as religious, those experiences or traditions that my informants designated as such.⁴³

Granted, the categories of theology and religion tend to overlap in scholarship and practice. Discourses about God or gods can derive from experiences that one might describe as religious, and vice versa. Robert K. Johnston, a key contributor to discussions about film and theology, claimed that his call to vocational ministry occurred while watching *Becket* (1964). That experience, in turn, has shaped his understanding of the theological significance of film.⁴⁴ Although theology, broadly understood, is arguably inseparable from religious experience, I nevertheless have maintained a distinction between the two categories in order to distinguish abstract beliefs or assertions from other forms of practice, a theoretical move that makes it possible to explore the relationship between the two. Furthermore, maintaining said distinction also makes it possible to identify and give voice to the diverse traditions represented in the story of *Karunamayudu*. Christian theology, in its more formal sense, has played as significant a role in the story of the film as less formally structured practices commonly associated with Hinduism.

A final clarification is in order. Just as 'religion' is arguably a Western construct, so too is the term 'Hinduism'.⁴⁵ Recognizing that the term is a contested one, the political and religious overtones of which have been interpreted in various

Publishing, 1999), 11, in David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 70.

⁴¹ Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 53.

⁴² For an introduction to the issues involved with the study of religious experience, see Bernard Spilka, *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach*, 3rd ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2003), chapters 1 and 2; William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London: Longmans, Green, 1902).

⁴³ Alternatively, one might call them 'primal experiences'. Irving Hexham and Karla O. Poewe, *Understanding Cults and New Age Religions* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1998), 24, 60. See also, Peter Antes, 'What Do We Experience If We Have Religious Experience?', *Numen* 49, no. 3 (2002).

⁴⁴ Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2000), 29.

⁴⁵ Geoffrey A. Oddie, *Imagining Hinduism* (New Delhi: Sage, 2006), 342. See also, J. E. Llewellyn, *Defining Hinduism: A Reader* (London: Equinox, 2005).

ways by scholars, I nevertheless use it throughout as designated by sources or informants.

4.2 What this project is not about

This study is not, strictly speaking, an example of traditional film criticism. Although I devoted an entire chapter to an analysis of the film itself, I was not concerned exclusively with providing a review of *Karunamayudu*. Neither was I particularly interested in adjudicating the film's faithfulness to creedal Christology or the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life.⁴⁶ This is not a study in how to do Jesus film evangelism 'better' although I hope that the questions raised here will be instructive to advocates of the practice. Nor did I read the film and its content primarily as a barometer of South Indian culture during the era in which it was produced.⁴⁷ Although this analysis may for various reasons be of interest to scholars of world Christianity or Christian mission, my primary objective was not to trace the modulations of Christian expression and transformation in non-Western contexts.⁴⁸ Finally, I was keen to avoid imposing theories of cinema and culture on either the history or content of the film that were marked by Western concerns or aesthetic tastes.⁴⁹

Instead, as the central research questions and my research objectives indicate, this project was designed to map and attempt to explain the indirect and interactive relationship between theological traditions or religious experiences and the significance attributed to it. This is still new territory for the discussion of film,

⁴⁶ For a theological analyses of a number of major Jesus films, see Lloyd Baugh, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997).

⁴⁷ Margaret Miles argues that 'films reveal how a society represents itself to itself'. Margaret Miles, *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996), 10.

⁴⁸ I recommend by way of introduction to related works: Judith M. Brown and Robert Eric Frykenberg, eds., *Christians, Cultural Interactions, and India's Religious Traditions*, ed. R.E. Frykenberg and Brian Stanley, *Studies in the History of Christian Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI, and London: William B. Eerdmans; RoutledgeCurzon, 2002); Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Mission* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1980); Brian Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag* (Leicester: Apollos, 1990); Brian Stanley, ed. *Missions, Nationalism, and the End of Empire*, ed. R.E. Frykenberg and Brian Stanley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003); Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, N.Y.; Edinburgh: Orbis Books; T&T Clark, 1996).

⁴⁹ For a cautionary essay against such tendencies, see Ashis Nandy, 'Notes Towards an Agenda for the Next Generation of Film Theorists in India', *South Asian Popular Culture* 1, no. 1 (2003).

religion, and theology, not only from a methodological perspective but also because I posed these questions in a non-Western context. The research methodologies that have given this study shape, therefore, emerged through a 'reflexive process' of engagement with the data over time.⁵⁰ I now review some of the influences on my approach, the methodological challenges I faced, as well as the constellation of discourses on which I drew in order to structure this account and make sense of the data that I collected about the film.

4.3 Anthropological influences

This study's central questions share a number of parallels with the discipline of media anthropology.⁵¹ Consequently, this study reflects a recent acknowledgement on the part of contributors to the discussion of film, religion, and theology, that anthropological insights, especially in the form of ethnographically informed reception analyses, have much to offer the conversation.⁵² I now review briefly some key aspects of media anthropology in order to demonstrate this study's parallels with the field.

Ethnography is arguably the touchstone of anthropological studies and commonly understood to describe analyses of culture and society constructed from a combination of on-site participant observation and interviews with informants in select locales.⁵³ According to anthropologist Clifford Geertz, however, ethnography is not confined to participant-observation or the taking of field notes alone. Rather, it consists in the 'intellectual effort' of 'thick description', or written 'explication' of

⁵⁰ I borrow this term from David L. Altheide, *Qualitative Media Analysis*, Qualitative Research Methods; V. 38 (Thousand Oaks, Calif; London: Sage, 1996), 14-15, 68, 80.

⁵¹ Rothenbuhler calls it a 'field'. Eric W. Rothenbuhler and Mihai Coman, *Media Anthropology* (Thousand Oaks, Calif and London: Sage, 2005), 13-15.

⁵² See John Lyden, *Film as Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 29, 32. Christopher Deacy, *Faith in Film: Religious Themes in Contemporary Cinema* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 5-9, 22, chapter 5; Another recent effort in this direction is Catherine Barsotti, 'Películas-¿: A Gaze from Reel to Real?: Going to the Movies with Latinas in Los Angeles', in *Reframing Theology and Film*, ed. Robert K. Johnston (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

⁵³ Paul Atkinson and others, eds., *Handbook of Ethnography* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2007), 1-8.

social activities in a given context.⁵⁴ Although scholars of film, religion, and theology have recently expressed interest in the potential contributions of ethnographic reception analysis, media anthropologists have been exploring similar lines of inquiry for some time.⁵⁵

According to Susan Allen, the term 'media anthropology' was first coined in 1969 in response to a felt need for anthropologists to contribute to public, especially journalistic, discourse.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, there is currently no definitive description of the field.⁵⁷ It may be an oversimplification to suggest that the term can be understood in at least two ways. As an applied practice it blends anthropological, journalism, and mass communication studies to provide media audiences with an "'anthropological' perspective' on pertinent issues. As an act of research it 'studies the communications process from anthropological perspectives'.⁵⁸ Alternatively, it has been suggested that media anthropology 'incorporates all of the quantitative and qualitative methods of anthropology and communications studies'.⁵⁹ Likewise, Kelly Askew has described media anthropology recently as 'ethnographically informed, historically grounded, and context-sensitive analyses of the ways in which people use and make sense of media technologies'.⁶⁰ Common methods of research include ethnography, 'situated knowledge', 'intimate, long-term reflexive encounters' between observers and those they observe, and a sense of the rhythms of daily life.⁶¹

⁵⁴ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973; reprint, 2000), 6, 7.

⁵⁵ That said, however, anthropological studies of various media have been carried out in a number of different contexts. For example, Hortense Powdermaker, *Hollywood, the Dream Factory. An Anthropologist Looks at the Movie-Makers* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1951); Faye D. Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin, *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

⁵⁶ Susan L. Allen, *Media Anthropology: Informing Global Citizens* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1994), 2. For a timeline of the development of media anthropology as a discipline, including early contributors, see 8-12.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, xxi.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁹ E.B. Eiselein and Martin Topper, 'Media Anthropology'. *Human Organization* 35 (June 1976): 111-120, referenced in *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶⁰ Kelly Michelle Askew and Richard R. Wilk, eds., *The Anthropology of Media: A Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 2, 3. The discipline is also known by other names, including 'anthropology of mass media', 'mass communication anthropology, anthropology of culture and media', or media ethnography. Rothenbuhler and Coman, 13.

⁶¹ Mark Allen Peterson, *Anthropology & Mass Communication: Media and Myth in the New Millennium* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2003), 8.

What sets media anthropology apart from anthropology as traditionally understood, is its relatively newfound willingness to take media seriously. The study of media has traditionally been taboo among anthropologists because of media's associations with modernity, and the perception that mass media are more powerful than older media.⁶² Globalization and mass media have also threatened anthropology's traditional understanding of the local as a 'congruence of people, culture, and place'.⁶³ Media products like films, however, can travel, be reproduced, and become 'local' in a variety of places.⁶⁴ Furthermore, since the 1980s and 1990s researchers have become increasingly conscious of the 'economic, political, and cultural traffic' occurring between 'First' and 'Third' worlds.⁶⁵ Consequently, theories and practices related to anthropological analyses of media have become 'unbounded, multisited, traveling, or itinerant'.⁶⁶

At issue for media anthropology studies, especially, therefore, are several important questions that resonate with the interests of this study:

How, for example, do mass media represent and shape cultural values within a given society? What is their place in the formation of social relations and social identities? How might they structure people's senses of space and time? What are their roles in the construction of communities ranging from subcultures to nation-states, and in global processes of socioeconomic and cultural change?⁶⁷

Mark Allen Peterson has argued that 'an anthropology of mass media, in the fullest sense of the term, must be more than just ethnography'; it demands theoretical reflection on media in a way that explains its significance in everyday life.⁶⁸ Such reflection involves a kind of 'cross-reading' beneficial to both anthropology and mass

⁶² Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin. 3.

⁶³ Ibid., 2-3. That is not to say that all anthropologists ought to be painted with such a broad brush.

⁶⁴ See along these lines, Christiane Brosius and Melissa Butcher, *Image Journeys: Audio-Visual Media and Cultural Change in India* (New Delhi and London: Sage Publications, 1999).

⁶⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 4. What has not been lost, according to Rothenbuhler and Coman, is anthropology's consistent interest in 'revealing the common logic' behind the vagaries of experience and culture that suggest 'the profound unity of the human mind'. Rothenbuhler and Coman, 15.

⁶⁷ Spitulnik, 293-294.

⁶⁸ Peterson, 18.

communication studies and, as this study suggests, to studies in film, religion, and theology.⁶⁹

Media anthropology also differs from other approaches to the study of media with which it shares an interest in ethnographic practices, including visual ethnography, visual sociology, media sociology, visual anthropology, or the study of visual culture.⁷⁰ Peterson has argued that what sets media anthropology apart from the above categories disciplines is a triad of commitments characteristic to anthropological studies, including ethnography, a concern for cross-cultural comparison, and an enduring interest in 'circuits of exchange'.⁷¹ By 'circuits of exchange' Peterson referred to the various negotiations that mark our daily lives, even if they are not always construed in terms of money or gifts.⁷² In his view, the most fascinating exchanges are those involved with the reconfiguring of social relations.⁷³

To summarize the perspective of a number of scholars currently at the forefront of this field, the task of media anthropology 'is to trace both how and why media messages go awry and yet also how they shape lives, treating audiences neither as resistant heroes to be celebrated nor as duped victims to be pitied'.⁷⁴ This interest in the negotiations of meaning and significance attributed to a given media product resonated with my own questions about the details of *Karunamayudu's* story, the way it has functioned in everyday life, and the way cross-cultural traffic of various kinds has marked its production, distribution, and reception history. My

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ See, respectively, on visual ethnography: Sarah Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography: Images, Media and Representation in Research* (London: Sage, 2001); On visual anthropology: Jay Ruby, 'Visual Anthropology', in *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology*, ed. David Levinson and Melvin Ember (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996). 'The field may be conceptually wide-ranging, but in practice visual anthropology is dominated primarily by an interest in pictorial media as a means of communicating anthropological knowledge, that is, ethnographic films and photographs and, secondarily, the study of pictorial manifestations of culture', 1345; On visual culture: Margarita Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn* (Boston: MIT Press, 2005); W.J.T. Mitchell, 'Showing Seeing: a Critique of Visual Culture', in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London: Routledge, 2002); S. Brent Plate, *Religion, Art, and Visual Culture: A Cross-Cultural Reader* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).

⁷¹ Peterson, 3, 18; The latter component is of particular concern to Allen, xix.

⁷² Ibid., 5-6; Peterson, 15; See also, Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Janet Harbord, *Film Cultures* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), 2-4.

⁷³ Peterson, 243.

⁷⁴ Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin, 13.

commitment to developing a thick description of the film's history and the various exchanges that have marked the history of the film, therefore, reflected the methodological influence of media anthropology on this project. This theoretical framework was complemented by anthropological studies of various media products. Although none of them focused explicitly on film, I nevertheless found them instructive in shaping the following account. I mention a number below by way of illustration.

4.4 Instructive case studies

In *The Lives of Indian Images* Richard H. Davis explored 'the different worlds of belief that Indian religious images have come to inhabit over time, and the conflicts over their identities that have often surrounded them'.⁷⁵ By contrast, Richard Raskin's *Child at Gunpoint: A Case Study in the Life of a Photo* followed the life of a single photograph from WWII that portrayed a young Jewish boy apparently being held at gunpoint by a Nazi guard. Drawing on a wide range of documentary and visual evidence, Raskin demonstrated how this image has been described and modified over the years in order to satisfy a variety of ideological agendas. He also demonstrated how the photograph has inspired other works of art including musical compositions, poetry and paintings.⁷⁶ Christopher Pinney's *Photos of the Gods* examined god and goddess images in India to make 'a case for visual culture as a key arena for the thinking out of politics and religion in India'.⁷⁷ Especially instructive was his observation that 'a nuanced history' of such images tends to complicate many of the simplistic propositions about their relationship to the cultural context in which they were produced.⁷⁸ In other words, their social and political significance changed as they moved through different networks.⁷⁹ Similarly, the collection of essays in Arjun

⁷⁵ Richard H. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton, NJ and Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1997), 6.

⁷⁶ Richard Raskin, *A Child at Gunpoint: A Case Study in the Life of a Photo* (Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 2004).

⁷⁷ Christopher Pinney, *'Photos of the Gods': The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 8.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 12.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Appadurai's edited work, *The Social Life of Things*, examined both how people attribute value to things and how things influence social relations. As Janet Harbord argued in *Film Cultures*, 'the "value" of a film is produced relationally'.⁸⁰ Reinforcing the theological significance of such discussions is Oliver O'Donovan's *Common Objects of Love*, in which he reflects on the post 9/11 media environment as a discourse between competing religious perspectives on images.⁸¹

Together, these studies affirmed and encouraged my approach to the history of *Karunamayudu*, especially the hypothesis that a product's perceived value may not only change, but function differently, depending on a variety of factors. Those shifting values, I suggest, might also be linked to the ways in which theological or religious traditions have trained us to see. Davis's and Pinney's works in particular highlighted the possibility that one's engagement with images or media products can be informed by theological and religious traditions.⁸² Furthermore, Appadurai's work, admittedly inspired by Igor Kopytoff, provided a rationale for my untutored habit of referring to the *life* of *Karunamayudu*. Kopytoff has argued that because things, including films, influence social relations, it is also possible to speak of them as having biographies.⁸³

4.5 Defining outcomes

Although the studies by media anthropologists mentioned affirmed the importance of asking the central questions around which this project turned, none dealt comprehensively with film or provided a framework for articulating the negotiation of a single film in the context of multiple religious traditions. Therefore, I found

⁸⁰ Harbord, 2.

⁸¹ Oliver O'Donovan, *Common Objects of Love: Moral Reflection and the Shaping of Community: The 2001 Stob Lectures* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 57.

⁸² See also Dyrness.

⁸³ Igor Kopytoff, 'The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process', in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Kopytoff's thesis resonates with David Bordwell's note that critics tend to personify texts in the interpretative enterprise. David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1989), chapter 7.

David Morgan's *The Sacred Gaze*, especially his discussion of human 'covenants with images', an instructive complement to the works noted above.⁸⁴

Morgan's thesis is borne in part out of long-standing attention to the negotiation of art and religion; perhaps most notably, the relationship between Protestants and images in America. His basic premise is 'that viewer and image agree to a particular range of possibilities and codes of interpretation before the viewer is able to see what the image may reveal'.⁸⁵ He calls this agreement between viewer and image a covenant. He suggests by way of example that one's belief that an image is 'truthful' may be informed by a variety of sources ranging from one's religious community, persons in authority, or its faithfulness to one's own experience or ideals.⁸⁶ These covenants, however, are not necessarily fixed; they may be broken or renegotiated.⁸⁷ A loss of faith in one's community or authority might call one's covenant with a particular image into question. Should an adult discover, for example, that his biological father is not the person whose image has populated his photo albums from childhood, his faith in those images, or any historical claim based on photographic evidence may undergo significant revision.

Although Morgan deals almost exclusively with two-dimensional images, I suggest that his theoretical framework is pertinent for analyzing the religious or theological significance of film generally. Furthermore, it is helpful for articulating the influence of religious and theological traditions in the history *Karunamayudu*. Additionally, it provided a flexible framework for articulating the relationship between film and religion in contexts like India where viewers have typically been exposed to a greater multiplicity of traditions than their Western counterparts.

Although none of the case studies mentioned above dealt directly with film, they nevertheless highlighted the modulating relationships between religious and visual practices that can develop over time as visual products engage multiple communities. As media scholar David Machin has noted, people may speak confidently of their beliefs but 'not have access to the reasons why they do things'.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), chapter 3.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 76.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 77.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 81.

⁸⁸ David Machin, *Ethnographic Research for Media Studies* (London: Arnold, 2002), 10.

Therefore, the potential contribution of such an analysis for the study of film, religion, and theology was the opportunity to understand the role theology plays in the ways people engage with film.

4.6 Methodological Challenges

The major methodological challenge I faced in constructing this research strategy was a dearth of examples from which to draw. Consequently, my approach was informed by the words of media scholar Martin Barker et al., who noted in the introduction to one of the most comprehensive film reception analyses published to date that 'there is no such thing as perfect research. There are only better or worse ways of tackling questions under the conditions given and constraining the project'.⁸⁹ Given the nature of my central research questions, therefore, I determined to employ a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods. It was an approach that enabled me to construct a detailed account of the film's history and corroborate or qualify claims made about the film by various persons. The reflexive nature of the process also made it possible to identify links and patterns in the evidence collected.⁹⁰

The task of articulating those links and patterns was in turn complicated by shifts in the relationship between film, religion, and theology that occurred at various stages in the life of the film. The religio-cultural dynamics of *Karunamayudu's* production history, for example, have little in common with the evangelistic ethos in which the film has circulated for over thirty years. A related challenge was to select research methods most likely to uncover evidence of theological or religious traditions at work in the history of the film. Again, Hoover's insights were instructive:

There are often a number of ways that people can and do describe media in relation to their religious lives, but . . . deeper and more

⁸⁹ Barker and Mathijs, 16.

⁹⁰ Like Martin Barker, et al., I endeavoured to move beyond simply 'showing *variety* and *complexity*', to 'disclose *patterns* and *connections*'. Barker and Mathijs, 213.

directly meaningful directions come only after some reflection and conversation . . . received categories of religious experience and practice do not readily correlate with ways of thinking about and using media'.⁹¹

Hoover's comments are a reminder that the religious and theological traditions with which people self-identify may not always have a direct bearing on their media practices. Furthermore, getting at those correlations or disjunctions often requires sustained conversation. From a methodological perspective, then, one of my primary objectives was to encourage informants to reflect on *Karunamayudu* in ways that would stimulate more than superficial comments about the film. A second was to articulate the particular, and sometimes inconsistent, relationship between the religious traditions with which informants self-identified and their claims and practices related to the film. This second challenge was complicated by the recent observation of theologian and film critic Clive Marsh, who has observed in regard to film reception, that 'what constitutes a "religious" or "theological" worldview may be less easy to track and define than is commonly thought.'⁹² For example, I interviewed one woman in her home who told me that after becoming a Christian she had rejected all other gods. Yet her walls were still adorned with god images and statues. The apparent incongruity in her claim served as a reminder of the complex negotiations of context, culture, and theology that can inform religious practice in daily life. It also served as a caution to avoid drawing hasty conclusions about the veracity of an informant's claims without learning more about the perceptual frameworks that shape them. In light of these complexities, my criteria for establishing evidence of theological or religious influences were modest, limited for the most part in response to claims made by informants.

5. Approaches Employed

Having identified the main methodological challenges I faced in constructing this project, I now review briefly the various combinations of qualitative and quantitative

⁹¹ Hoover, 206.

⁹² Clive Marsh, 'On Dealing with What Films Actually Do to People,' in *Reframing Theology and Film*, ed. Robert K. Johnston (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2007), 150.

methods I employed in researching each stage in the history of *Karunamayudu*. In each case I recount my rationale for the methods selected, the sources to which I turned, and any constraints I encountered.

5.1 Analyzing production (chapter 3)

My first objective in analyzing the production of *Karunamayudu* was to develop as informed an account as possible of how and why the film was made, a project akin to what film scholar David Bordwell has called 'historical poetics'.⁹³ Bordwell suggests that the two primary questions one should ask of a film are: 'What forces brought it into being (for example, to what problems does its composition represent an attempted solution)?', and, 'What forces have mobilized it for various purposes?'⁹⁴ Granted, his concerns are typically oriented to modes of production rather than the relationship of films to culture or religion. Nevertheless, the historical impulse of his approach was instructive.

To develop an account of the film's production I employed both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative methods included the perusal of published articles, books, and interviews related to the film, as well as the administration of a questionnaire to over three hundred of its exhibitors.⁹⁵ Access to historical data about the film was constrained by the amount of time that has passed since it was produced, a paucity of archival data, and limited access to the persons involved with the film's production.

Much of the qualitative research was conducted in the course of two visits to India during which I was able to interview Fr. Christopher Coelho, the author of the film's original screenplays, as well as Vijay Chander, the man who produced the film and played Jesus. My interest in their motivations for making the film was not inspired by a desire to determine whether viewers had received its producers intended message. Instead, I was keen to understand how theological traditions or

⁹³ Bordwell, 265.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ See Appendix A for a copy of the questionnaire.

religious experiences informed Coelho's and Chander's participation in the film's production. Qualitative research took various forms as well, including personal, telephone, email, and semi-structured interviews with the film's principals.

5.2 Analyzing context (chapter 4)

In keeping with this study's focus on *film*, religion, and theology I opted to limit my discussion of the film's context primarily to that of Indian cinema, rather than the broader cultural and political history of India as a nation. My methodological approach in this section was predominantly quantitative. Drawing heavily on existing histories of the industry, I traced out in broad strokes some of the connections that Indian cinema scholars have made between religion and the genres and conventions of the industry. The literary sources on which I drew were limited to English publications, but I also benefited immensely from conversations with Indian cinema scholars during my visits to India.⁹⁶

5.3 Analyzing content (chapter 5)

There is a tendency among scholars who focus on the reception of films to downplay film criticism.⁹⁷ This tendency is, in part, a response to critics who infer that their interpretation of a film is the authoritative one.⁹⁸ Film and media critic Martin Barker, however, despite his commitment to reception analysis, has taken a more comprehensive approach to film criticism by arguing that the task involves asking

⁹⁶ I am especially grateful to the faculty at the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society in Bangalore for enlightening conversations, access to the Centre's library, and for inviting me to present a work in progress.

⁹⁷ See, for example, Steve Nolan, 'Towards a New Religious Film Criticism: Using Film to Understand Religious Identity Rather Than Locate Cinematic Analogue', in *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture*, ed. Jolyon Mitchell and Sophia Marriage (London: T & T Clark, 2003).

⁹⁸ Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton and Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1992), 12.

what demands are placed on viewers by a given film.⁹⁹ Barker's approach implies that films do not have an independent meaning as a text, nor does the viewer's interpretation of a film trump all other meanings. Barker is not looking to establish whether viewers interpreted accurately the director's intended meaning but to suggest that films do place some conditions on the viewing experience and are therefore worthy of analysis.

Following Barker, my analysis of *Karunamayudu* not only took seriously the film *qua film*, it also admitted a dynamic relationship between the film's production history and context, the form and content of the final cut, and the demands the film placed on viewers. Although copies of the theatrical release are hard to come by, I chose to base my review on the most complete version I could acquire as well as a Telugu – English copy of the script. Thanks to the late Fr. Christopher Coelho I was also able to peruse three drafts of his original screenplay for the film.

5.4 Analyzing distribution and exhibition (chapter 6)

The interrogation of *Karunamayudu*'s distribution and exhibition history was complicated by two key factors. Studies in film distribution have tended to focus on commercial networks, whereas the distribution history of *Karunamayudu* involved mostly non-commercial networks. Consequently, there were few models to work from. Furthermore, although *Karunamayudu* was produced initially for commercial distribution and is still available in VCD format through local video shops and online vendors, few details of its early commercial distribution patterns are on record.¹⁰⁰ My ability to create an account of its early commercial distribution, much less identify the possible influence of theological traditions and religious experiences on those practices or networks, was therefore limited to an emphasis on the film's non-commercial distribution. Details were gleaned through a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods.

⁹⁹ See Martin Barker and Thomas Austin, *From Antz to Titanic: Reinventing Film Analysis* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 12, 37, 190. Barker suggests that a film's reception is determined by the film itself, not its director.

¹⁰⁰ VCD is an abbreviation for Video Compact Disc, a format common in India.

The qualitative dimension was comprised of a limited ethnographic study as well as semi-structured interviews with select exhibitors of the film. The limited ethnographic study consisted of four days spent with a small team of men whose Christian ministry responsibilities included showing the film at least three times each week.¹⁰¹ I lived and travelled with them to observe one rural screening of *Karunamayudu*. I also conversed with them about their own movie-going habits and views of the film. Additionally, my guide during that four-day trip, who was at the time responsible for approximately twenty such teams in Andhra Pradesh (AP), also shared personal comments about the film in the course of our travels. Some time later, I was able to conduct a number of semi-structured interviews with other exhibitors of the film and interview the person primarily responsible for its distribution over the last thirty years.

These more qualitative approaches were complemented by a quantitative survey administered to three hundred exhibitors of the film consisting of several questions designed to solicit observations about its significance and reception in a variety of contexts. This combination of methods and data made it possible to corroborate or contrast claims made by *Karunamayudu*'s exhibitors and gain insight into the ways in which it has functioned in their daily lives. Evidence for the influence of theological traditions or religious experiences on the distribution and exhibition of the film varied, and included accounts of visions, claims about the film's representation of scripture and truth, and exhibitors' assertions about its efficacy.

5.5 Analyzing reception (chapter 7)

Reception studies scholars Martin Barker and Thomas Austin have established an integral link between film analysis and reception studies by suggesting that 'films are imaginative universes with organizing rules and principles; they generate a role into which audiences may (or may not) enter'.¹⁰² Two significant premises are foundational to their approach: 'films generate *roles*' for viewers, and viewers have to

¹⁰¹ Rev. S, interview by the author, 17 January 2006, Secunderabad, India.

¹⁰² Barker and Austin, *From Antz to Titanic: Reinventing Film Analysis*, 37.

agree to play those roles, acquire the skills necessary to do so, and 'agree to be involved in ways which enable her/him to play that role'.¹⁰³ Film analysis, therefore, is critical to reception studies because it helps to determine what questions to ask of 'actual audiences'.¹⁰⁴ According to film scholar Janet Staiger the study of reception 'has as its object researching the history of the interactions between real readers and texts, actual spectators and films'.¹⁰⁵ Reception, therefore, is primarily a historically oriented quest as opposed to a theoretical one. In other words, it is not concerned primarily with generating theories of how viewers might interpret films but how individuals 'actually have understood' them.¹⁰⁶ That is not to suggest that reception studies ignore the 'production-text relation' altogether.¹⁰⁷ Instead, it is to decentralize the interpretation of films alone and ask how an understanding of their reception might complement other analytical concerns related to the study of cinema.

One of my objectives in analyzing *Karunamayudu*, therefore, was to posit some claims about the demands it places on viewers. In order to determine how 'actual' viewers have responded to the demands placed on them by *Karunamayudu* I employed three methodologies, the first two of which were more qualitative in nature. I observed three public screenings of the film in India, paying particular attention to the activities and responses of viewers. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with Telugu-speaking viewers of the film from a variety of backgrounds or who had seen the movie in multiple formats and contexts. A third, more quantitative method, involved a discussion of comments about the film's reception gleaned from a survey questionnaire administered to over three hundred of its exhibitors. In particular, I considered their own responses to the film as well as their perceptions of how viewers' religious and cultural backgrounds have influenced its reception.

Identifying connections between theological traditions, religious experiences, and the film's reception was most difficult at this stage because of a limited ability to corroborate claims made by distributors or viewers either through observation or

¹⁰³ Ibid., 39.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 41.

¹⁰⁵ Staiger, 8.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

extended conversation. That said, the data gleaned nevertheless offered some introductory insights for consideration.

6. Constraints

As a white male in India, I could not escape the possibility of being perceived as a Western Christian missionary. I was most aware of this dynamic when in the company of those who exhibit the film for evangelistic purposes. Nevertheless, it was an inevitable tension that I had to live with, given my desire to access the film's current exhibition network and observe first-hand its reception in non-commercial contexts. The occasional result was that my intentions, and reticence to participate in activities that could compromise my objectives, were occasionally misunderstood. My lack of fluency in Telugu also meant that I was often dependent on guides and hosts to arrange for accommodations and contacts. Occasionally, such constraints prevented me from following up on leads or completing instructive conversations.

These constraints, however, were offset by the opportunity to analyze the exhibition of the film as a participant-observer. Furthermore, because Fr. Christopher Coelho did not know Telugu he wrote all of his drafts of the screenplay in English; consequently, I was able to evaluate them in their original language. Finally, although occasional logistical challenges, often prevented me from achieving the in-depth reception analysis I had originally envisioned, I was able to acquire more comprehensive insights into the dynamics of film, religion, and theology in Indian cinema than I anticipated originally.

7. Ethical Considerations

In keeping with standard research protocols at the University of Edinburgh, I requested permission from all my informants to quote them, with the caveat that they could decline participation at any time or ask that their comments be struck from the

record.¹⁰⁸ Where possible I also recorded these requests for permission and replies in audio or video formats. The questionnaire I used to survey the crowd of exhibitors spelled out these details at the top and included a copy of my signature, as well as place for respondents to sign to indicate their agreement to be interviewed.¹⁰⁹ In most cases I still anonymized the names of informants.

Such protocols were especially critical for this study, given that many of the people with whom I conversed would not likely have had recourse to the legal channels necessary to challenge my use of the information they provided. Although all of my informants gave me permission to publish their names I used my own discretion in choosing when to do so. All the names of those in impoverished areas have been changed to protect their identity. Furthermore, although *Karunamayudu* is often screened in Church buildings for local congregations and is broadcast regularly on local television networks, its exhibition has also been tied closely to Christian evangelistic efforts. Given the anti-conversion laws in India and the various ways in which they may be interpreted, anyone involved in using the film this way had to consider carefully the statements they allowed on the record, lest they be misquoted or put themselves and their families at risk.¹¹⁰ Consequently, I opted to name only the leaders of these organizations whose identities are already publicly available.

8. Significance of research

I conclude this chapter by mentioning briefly the significance of this study as well as some of its potential contributions to critical conversations about film's relationship to religion and theology. A more detailed discussion of these observations will be the subject of the last chapter.

¹⁰⁸ For the ethical policies at the University of Edinburgh, see <http://www.hss.ed.ac.uk/Research/support/ethicsframework.htm>

¹⁰⁹ See Appendix A.

¹¹⁰ The risk to their lives and families is very real. Film exhibition teams have occasionally been beaten, and as I will discuss in the chapter related to the film's distribution, exhibitors regularly base the nature of their presentation of the film in relation to the political environment of a given area. That said, antagonistic reactions to these teams may be related more to the alternative activities associated with the screening of the film by such groups than with the content of the film itself.

8.1 Historical significance

The historical significance of this study can be expressed in a number of ways. On the one hand, it offers a rare insight into Christianity in Indian cinema, as well as Christianity's engagement with Hinduism in the cinematic context. One might argue further that the film is a case study in Indian Christology. It also contributes to the history of the Jesus film genre by discussing a Jesus film in a context where Christianity is not a dominant influence on the cultural context in which it was produced. Additionally, it provides an unprecedented insight into the travels of Jesus films in India. Although Cecil B. DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1927) has been known to circulate outside Europe and the Americas, this is to my knowledge the first study of a Jesus film's journeys in a non-Western context. On a more general note, this may be the first analysis of a film's shifting relationships to religion and theology at every stage in its journey from production to reception.

8.2 Theoretical significance

In my view the most significant theoretical significance of this study has to do with the contextual and theoretical contingencies that surface when comparing the way people interact with film. Those contingencies, in turn, make methodological demands that I will discuss in greater detail in the last chapter. Moving beyond the realm of film itself, I suggest that this study can also 'enrich our understanding of religious practice in a media age' by drawing attention to its intersections with other religious traditions, media, and cultural contexts.¹¹¹ Although film is more than a visual medium, this study also sheds some light on the kinds of 'covenants' people have with images, thereby contributing to discussions of visual culture.¹¹² The shifting dynamics involved with the film from production to reception remind us that viewers can and do draw on a variety of perceptual frameworks when negotiating the

¹¹¹ Mitchell, 'Emerging Conversations in the Study of Media, Religion and Culture', 338.

¹¹² Morgan, chapter 3.

meaning of media products.¹¹³ Given the heuristic nature of this study, I suggest that it foregrounds, and make some modest contributions toward, an understanding of how 'we place the voice of the media in to people's lives in a broader sense'.¹¹⁴ By attending to the discourses surrounding the viewing of this film in a non-Western context, this study also draws attention to the dynamics contained in any discussion of media products in non-Western contexts.¹¹⁵

9. Conclusion

In this chapter I have provided an overview of the development of this study's central research questions, my research objectives, and my rationale for the research methodologies I employed. Additionally, I discussed briefly a few of my key research objectives, the ethical considerations I had to take into account, and the logistical constraints that shaped my analysis. Simply put, I explained how I made the central questions researchable and I justified the methodological approaches employed in analyzing every stage of the film's journey from production to reception. Although this study is meant to contribute to the broader discussion of film, religion, and theology, it does so using methods common to the field of media anthropology. In conclusion I registered some initial claims about the significance of this study for ongoing research in the discussion. Having established the parameters for this study, I now turn to consider the history of *Karunamayudu* itself.

¹¹³ Hall; Morley and British Film Institute; David Miller and Glasgow Media Group, *The Circuit of Mass Communication: Media Strategies, Representation and Audience Reception in the Aids Crisis* (London: Sage, 1998).

¹¹⁴ Machin, 10.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 47.

CHAPTER THREE

A Cinematic Jesus for India: The Production of *Karunamayudu*¹

1. Introduction

The production history of *Karunamayudu* (1978) is a tale of perseverance and collaboration that remains largely unaccounted for in Jesus film scholarship. Spanning nearly five years (c.1974-1978) during one of the most turbulent decades in India's history as a nation, the film's production was plagued by a lack of funds, interpersonal conflicts, changes in key personnel, and the death of a director. In keeping with the overarching concern of this research project, my primary objective in this chapter is to identify, where possible, the religious and theological influences on the production of *Karunamayudu*. Developing a well-rounded understanding of those dynamics, however, required attention both to the details of production as well as to the context in which, and for which, it was produced. Therefore, I have opted to address the production of *Karunamayudu* in two sections. In this chapter, I provide what may well be the most detailed history of the film's production to date, paying particular attention to the contingent role of theological traditions and religious experiences in the process. In addition, I discuss the religious or theological significance attributed to the film by its principals.² In the next chapter I discuss the context in which the film was produced, focusing primarily on Indian cinema as the

¹ Pronounced (kah-roon-ah-my-u-du; Telugu for 'Man of Compassion' or 'Embodiment of Mercy' or 'The Merciful One')

² If I have understood correctly, this is what Raymond Williams has referred to as the 'social relations in arts'; Raymond Williams, *Culture*, Fontana New Sociology (London: Fontana, 1981), 24. Put another way, I'm interested in the 'subtle ways people create and maintain spiritual ideals through the exchange of goods and construction of spaces'. Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 6. Quoted in Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 1.

contextual horizon against which this story's significance may be articulated.³

That theological and religious traditions have played a part in the production of *Karunamayudu* is not a particularly novel observation. As noted in chapter one, the making of Jesus films, at least in the West, has always been plagued by a predictable set of theological tensions, most of which have revolved around the question of how to represent Jesus in a way that is both faithful to orthodox Christology and relevant to the contemporary cultural context.⁴ What sets the production of *Karunamayudu* apart from its Western counterparts and the two Indian films of Jesus' life that preceded it, however, is the unique combination of theological, religious and cultural influences that marked its composition.⁵ As I will argue briefly in the next chapter, however, its Indianness has more to do with the factors that its principals had to negotiate than its cultural context or stylistic qualities alone. Although the content of *Karunamayudu* reflects the influence of the Roman Catholic tradition, it was produced in India, by Indians, and for Indian commercial cinema.⁶ Its production values were marked not only by the intersection of Christianity and Hinduism in the context of South India but also by a fusion of Western and Indian cinematic conventions.

I attempted to approach the history of *Karunamayudu* with as few theoretical presuppositions as possible so as to avoid projecting Western theories of film and culture uncritically onto a non-Western scenario.⁷ Following the impulse of David Bordwell's call for a return to 'historical poetics' in film studies, I drew on as many

³³ Film historian and critic David Bordwell stresses that film style depends on the interaction between industries. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (New York and London: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 388-389. My decision to limit a discussion of those potential connections, however, is determined more by the need to focus this study than a loyalty to Bordwell's thesis.

⁴ See, for example, Lloyd Baugh, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997); W. Barnes Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 1997).

⁵ To my knowledge, the two Indian Jesus films that preceded *Karunamayudu* were *Mulla Kireetam* ('Crown of Thorns'; c.1960s) and *Jesus* (1973).

⁶ To be precise, the centurion in *Karunamayudu* was reportedly played by a Western actor, a Dutch Roman Catholic priest by the name of Hubert de Bie. John Wijngaards, telephone interview by the author, 05 April 2008, Edinburgh, Scotland. From my observation, P.A. Thomas' *Jesus* (1973) also includes a number of Western actors.

⁷ 'So when you go to see an Indian popular film, you must do so in the right frame of mind: understand that what you are seeing is not a realistic, western-type film with a linear narrative but a film that conforms to a different set of aesthetic imperatives'. K. Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake, *Indian Popular Cinema: A Narrative of Cultural Change*, Revised and Updated ed. (Stoke on Trent, UK: Trentham Books, 2004), 31.

sources as possible in order to understand why and how this film was made.⁸ As noted in the previous chapter, these sources included published articles related to the film, drafts of the original screenplay, and personal conversations with its principals.⁹

2. Production History and Analysis

The production history of *Karunamayudu* can be divided into two stages, distinguishable by their respective working titles: *Raraju Kristu* (Telugu for 'Christ, King of Kings') and *Karunamayudu*.¹⁰ The first stage encompassed a period from late 1973 / early 1974 to approximately 1976, and the second from approximately 1976 to the film's release in 1978.¹¹ Without an awareness of these two distinct stages in the film's production, one might easily conclude from at least one interview with Vijay Chander (producer), that he had played Jesus in two separate movies.¹² Alternatively, one might be led to believe that *Karunamayudu* was his idea from the start. Like most films, however, the production of *Karunamayudu* was a collaborative effort that is not only difficult to attribute to one person but involved negotiations of religion and cinematic style.

⁸ David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1989), 267.

⁹ Available sources were found in print and online: 'Amruthavani: Andhra's Catholic Communications Centre', *Indian Currents* 1993; Freek L. Bakker, 'The Image of Jesus Christ in the Jesus Films Used in Missionary Work', *Exchange* 33, no. 4 (2004); Christopher Coelho, 'How Hindus Filmed the Life of Christ', *Action*, January 1980; Dwight Friesen, '*Karunamayudu*: Seeing Christ Anew in Indian Cinema', in *Images of the Word: Hollywood's Bible and Beyond*, ed. David Shepherd (Atlanta: SBL, 2008); 'Hindu's Jesus Film -- a Hit in India', *Action*, January 1980; Joshua Newton, 'Blockbuster Evangelism', *Christianity Today* <http://www.ctlibrary.com/10502> (accessed 20 April 2005); Sri Sathavahana, 'Vijaychander, Born to Perform Jesus', <http://www.ilovehyd.com/interviews/interviews-vijaychander-born-to-perform-jesus.html> (accessed 12 May 2005). Thanks to Vijay Chander for his hospitality and the invitation to reside at his home for several days. It was one of two key ethnographic moments in this project. A brief discussion of Coelho's screenplays can be found in chapter 5.

¹⁰ In a personal email to the author (21 May 2006), Fr. Christopher Coelho, author the screenplay, suggested that this title was likely inspired by Cecil B. DeMille's *King of Kings* (1927).

¹¹ Fr. Christopher Coelho, author of the screenplay and co-director has described the period as encompassing 'four years and eight months'. Coelho, 17. I discuss the dating of the two stages below.

¹² R. S. Sugirtharajah, 'Indian Cowboy, Hindu Christ', *One World* 49 (1979); 18.

2.1 Stage one – *Raraju Kristu* (c.1974-1976)

The following account is pieced together from the accounts of several people involved with the production of the film.¹³ Early in 1974 two South Indian filmmakers made an appointment with Fr. M.M. Balaguer, S.J., director of Amruthavani Communications Centre, a Roman Catholic agency in Secunderabad, Andhra Pradesh (AP).¹⁴ The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the possibility of collaborating on the production of a movie of Christ's life. According to Fr. Raymond Ambroise, Executive Director of Amruthavani at that time, A.S. Raju (producer) of Janatha (People's) Art Theatres had already begun shooting a movie of Jesus' life 'in December of 1973 or early January 1974'.¹⁵ Raju, apparently, had already run out of money.¹⁶ Therefore, according to Fr. Christopher Coelho, Raju and his director Gaddam Krishnamoorthy (originally from AP themselves) had broached the subject of collaborating on the project with Fr. Arulappa (1912-1996), then Roman Catholic archbishop of Madras (Chennai), Tamil Nadu.¹⁷ Fr. Arulappa, however, had recommended they meet with Fr. Balaguer of Amruthavani in Secunderabad, since that agency's apostolic mandate was specifically related to the media. Fr. Balaguer, in turn, had sent a telegram to his newly appointed member of staff, Coelho, requesting his presence at the consultation.¹⁸

Coelho was a natural choice for a consultant. He had recently returned to India from a course in radio and television production and direction at West Herts, Hatch End, England, where he had been trained by the likes of Leslie Smith of the

¹³ This account is based on the most recent details available at the time of writing.

¹⁴ Amruthavani is pronounced (ahm-roo-ta-vah-nee). Amruthavani is Telugu for 'the sweet immortal voice'. See www.amruthavani.com; 'Amruthavani: Andhra's Catholic Communications Centre'.

¹⁵ Fr. Raymond Ambroise, personal email to author, 20 February 2008. This corroborates Vijay Chander's claim about the dates of his first involvement with the film. Sathavahana. A note scribbled on a copy of one of Coelho's scripts indicates that Raju's company was called Janatha People's Theatre. Note that the archbishop of Hyderabad at the time was also a Fr. Arulappa. His name enters the story later, but the two men must not be confused.

¹⁶ Fr. Raymond Ambroise, personal email to author, 20 February 2008.

¹⁷ The full names of the two men were corroborated through a combination of personal email correspondence, a personal interview with the screenwriter, and an email from the Executive Director of Amruthavani at the time: Christopher Coelho, personal email to author, 20 Feb. 07; Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India; Fr. Raymond Ambroise, personal email to author, 20 February 2008.

¹⁸ Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India; Coelho, 16.

BBC.¹⁹ Afterward, he had travelled to the USA to study music at St John's Abbey, Minnesota, followed by six months experience in media related work at the Franciscan Communications Center in Los Angeles.²⁰ One might have expected Coelho to welcome the possibility of involvement with a feature film. Instead, the invitation was an annoying interruption to his work on a book about St Francis of Assisi.²¹

By Coelho's estimation, the two filmmakers did not make a promising team. Raju was an exhibitor who had reportedly never produced a film and Krishnamoorthy only had experience as a film editor. Furthermore, their cameraman had apparently never shot in colour.²² Vijay Chander, cast as Jesus, had previously only played the role of a 'pistol shooting' 'tough guy' in a few movies.²³ That said he had appeared alongside notable Telugu film stars such as Akkineni Nageshwara Rao and Vijaya Lalitha.²⁴ Coelho also sensed to his dismay that the two men were motivated entirely by financial gain.²⁵ Furthermore, since in his estimation, even Western filmmakers had yet to do justice to the story of Jesus, he was especially doubtful that Indian filmmakers were up to the task.²⁶ In his view, Indian cinema with its formulaic songs, dances and characteristic 'overacting and unbelievably artificial situations', could hardly produce the 'kind of artistry and realism' necessary to represent the life of Christ.²⁷ His recent screening of a locally produced movie of Jesus' life had only reinforced his conviction. Although deemed a commercial

¹⁹ Christopher Coelho, personal email to the author, 24 February 2007.

²⁰ Details about Coelho's experience in the USA from 'Screen Play Writer and Co-Director of Karunamayudu, C. Coelho Passes Away, www.ccbi.in/viewnews.php?action=viewmore&value=669 (accessed 03 January 2008). Coelho was never officially enrolled at St John's although he did study there; Collier, Fr. Jerome (OSB), Personal correspondence to author, 17 January 2008.

²¹ Finally published in 1985, the book consists of personal reflections, musical compositions, photographs and sketches he made during visits to Assisi. Christopher Coelho, *New Kind of Fool: Meditations on St Francis* (Secunderabad: Amruthavani, 1986).

²² Coelho, 'How Hindus Filmed the Life of Christ', 16. Then again, Coelho had never produced a feature film, either.

²³ Sugirtharajah, 18; John Gilman, *They're Killing an Innocent Man*, Abridged ed. (USA: Dayspring International, 2001), 29.

²⁴ Sathavahana.

²⁵ Ibid; Coelho reiterated this conviction in a personal interview. Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India.

²⁶ Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India.

²⁷ Coelho, 'How Hindus Filmed the Life of Christ', 17.

success, it was in Coelho's view an artistic and cinematic 'monstrosity'.²⁸ He therefore recommended that Fr. Balaguer decline participation in the project. 'In India, with our poor techniques, and our poor tastes', he argued, 'we'll make only a mess of it'.²⁹

Coelho's superiors, however, saw things differently. Amruthavani's founder, Fr. John Wijngaards, recognized in Raju and Krishnamoorthy's request an unprecedented opportunity to collaborate with non-Christian filmmakers.³⁰ With Fr. Balaguer, he concluded shrewdly that by investing in the film, Amruthavani—and by extension, the Roman Catholic Church—could at least negotiate a degree of control over its content and style.³¹ Consequently, against Coelho's advice Raju and Krishnamoorthy received a start-up loan in the amount of 200,000 rupees on the premise that Coelho would pen the screenplay and serve as co-director with final authority on all matters related to the film.³² Out of respect for his superiors, Coelho agreed to the arrangement and since the filmmakers were eager to begin production, he set aside his book on St Francis to begin crafting the screenplay. He could not have guessed how long the project would take. Contrary to what some critics and online sources have reported, the film was not initiated or produced by Christians.³³ Personnel at Amruthavani only became involved by invitation. Although various staff played significant roles in the film's production, they deliberately avoided involvement in its production.

We may never know what motivated A.S. Raju and Krishnamoorthy to produce a movie of Jesus' life, save the possibility of turning a profit. Their surnames

²⁸ Ibid., 16. Coelho confirmed in an interview that the film referred to here was P.A. Thomas's *Jesus* (1973). Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India.

²⁹ Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India.

³⁰ Coelho, 'How Hindus Filmed the Life of Christ', 17; According to Wijngaards' account, the two filmmakers first approached him. John Wijngaards, telephone interview by the author, 05 April 2008, Edinburgh, Scotland.

³¹ Ibid.

³² By current exchange rates 200,000 rupees is approximately £2,439 (July, 2007); Ibid.17; Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India.

³³ For example, until recently, the Internet Movie Database mistakenly listed the film (under its Hindi title, *Daya Sagar* [1985; a reference to its date of dubbing into Hindi]), as a '160-minute version of the life of Jesus Christ filmed entirely with a cast and crew of Christian Indians in India'. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0162273/> (accessed 25 Jan 2008); That clip may have derived from the following source: <http://worldchristianvideos.org/indexl.php?VT=Lang&FL=H&IDX=34&VIDX=2884> (accessed 25 Jan 2008).

suggest that they were not associated with the Christian community in South India, and to date no evidence has surfaced to suggest they were inspired by personal devotion to Jesus. To be baffled that anyone but a Christian in India would want to make a movie of Jesus' life, however, reflects a lack of awareness about Indian society or the respect attributed to Jesus by adherents of other religious traditions. In an essay published not long after the release of *Karunamayudu*, scholar and cultural critic Prabhu Guptara made the following observation about the film:

What is surprising is not that a follower of traditional South Indian religion should have made the film, or that the film should have been a box-office success in a predominantly non-Christian country: Indians are deeply interested in religious matters, are usually quite catholic in the religious leaders they esteem and have always held Jesus in high respect, although Christianity and Churches draw less universal admiration.³⁴

More surprising, he argued, is that it took so long for Indian filmmakers to 'get on to such a potent subject as the life of Jesus'.³⁵

Apart from the name of Raju and Krishnamoorthy's production company—Janatha (People's) Art Theatres—I have collected no evidence to suggest they had overt political aspirations either.³⁶ It would not, however, have been surprising if they had. As I will discuss in the next chapter, movies of Jesus' life had political ramifications in the early years of Indian cinema. Furthermore, in South India numerous film stars who played gods and goddesses in mythological movies have leveraged their popularity to gain political power.³⁷ Rather, it appears the two filmmakers simply intended to profit from South India's devout population,

³⁴ Prabhu Guptara, 'Religion Has Shaped Indian Film', *Action*, January (1980), 20.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

³⁶ That said the Janatha Party routed the Indian Congress from power in 1977. Atul Kohli, 'The NTR Phenomenon in Andhra Pradesh: Political Change in a South Indian State', *Asian Survey* 28, no. 10 (1988), 991.

³⁷ For a variety of treatments of this phenomenon, see Duncan Forrester, 'Factions and Filmstars: Tamil Nadu Politics since 1971', *Asian Survey* 16, no. 3 (1976); Stephen P. Hughes, 'Mythologicals and Modernity: Contesting Silent Cinema in South India', *Postscripts* 1.2 / 1.3, no. (2005); Vaasanthi, *Cut-Outs, Caste and Cine Stars* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2006).

especially Christians. It is therefore curious that they did not choose to produce the film in Kerala since, in Coelho's words: 'anything about Christ will go in Kerala'.³⁸

At any rate, they were taking a risk. Although most of India's Christians live in the South, they have not been regulars at the box office due to a long-standing taboo in Christian circles against cinema attendance.³⁹ That said, Western movies of Jesus' life have circulated throughout India for decades.⁴⁰ To the best of my knowledge, however, none were dubbed into Indian languages or featured subtitles in Indian languages. I speculate that Raju and Krishnamoorthy's hopes were pinned on two factors. The first may well have been the recent success of a locally produced Jesus film, P.A. Thomas's *Jesus* (Tamil; 1973); a second, the possibility of financial support from the Church.⁴¹ If Raju and Krishnamoorthy's motivations cannot be traced to an overt theological or religious motivation, however, the same cannot be said for their collaborators at Amruthavani.

Given what little is known about their objectives, Raju and Krishnamoorthy's decision to solicit funding from the Roman Catholic Church for funding appears for the most part to have been a savvy business decision. In approaching Amruthavani, however, they courted the influence of a religious institution with a long standing, albeit by this time less controlling interest in the cinematic industry.⁴² Although in its earliest circulars about electronic media, the Church had spoken positively about

³⁸ Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India.

³⁹ According to a 2001 census, Christians represent 2.3% of the Indian population. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/in.html#> (accessed 27 February 2009); That is not to say that they do not watch films at home in privacy. For insight into the media viewing habits of Christians in South India, consult Sham Padinjattethil Thomas, 'Prime Time and Prayer Time: Television, Religion and the Practices of Everyday Life of Marthoma Christians in Kerala, India' (Thesis [PhD]), University of Edinburgh, 2005).

⁴⁰ Terry Lindvall, *Sanctuary Cinema: Origins of the Christian Film Industry* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2007), 193.

⁴¹ Not to be confused with dubbed versions of John Krish and Peter Sykes' *Jesus* (1979), now known more widely as Campus Crusade for Christ International's 'Jesus film'. See www.jesusfilmproject.org. The only materials I have found to date on Thomas's film include J. Isaac Moon, 'Image of Christ and Christians in Tamil Cinema' (B.D. Thesis, United Theological College, 1976); O. Rajendra Prasad, 'The Christian Message of Forgiveness as Seen in the Indian Films' (B.D. Thesis, United Theological College, 1981).

⁴² For more detailed reviews of the Roman Catholic Church's relationship to the cinema, see Gregory D. Black, *The Catholic Crusade against the Movies, 1940-1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Gaye Ortiz, 'The Catholic Church and Its Attitude to Film', in *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture*, ed. Jolyon Mitchell and Sophia Marriage (London: T & T Clark, 2003); James M. Skinner, *The Cross and the Cinema: The Legion of Decency and the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures, 1933-1970* (Westport, Conn; London: Praeger, 1993); Frank Walsh, *Sin and Censorship* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

their potential for good and evil, cinema had generally been treated with suspicion. Pope Pius XI's encyclical *Divini Illius Magistri* (1929) briefly referred to film, suggesting that Christians treat cinema with the same abhorrence St Augustine had expressed for the shows of his day.⁴³ Seven years later, however, a tone of cautious optimism emerged in the encyclical *Vigilanti Cura* ('With vigilante care': 1936), followed by a more positive endorsement of the media in the documents of Vatican II (1963). 'The Decree on the Media of Social Communications', also known as *Inter Mirifica* ('Marvelous Things'; 1963), recognized mass media not only as tools of communication, but also for their social and cultural significance.⁴⁴ *Inter Mirifica* may not have been the most refined document produced by the council, but it encouraged participation in projects like *Karunamayudu*.⁴⁵ One can almost imagine the following quotation running through Fr. Balaguer's mind when he was first approached by Raju and Krishnamoorthy:

The production and showing of films that have value as decent entertainment, humane culture or art, especially when they are designed for young people, ought to be encouraged and assured by every effective means. This can be done particularly by supporting and joining in projects and enterprises for the production and distribution of decent films, by encouraging worthwhile films through critical approval and awards, by patronizing or jointly sponsoring theaters operated by Catholic and responsible managers.⁴⁶

By investing in the film, therefore, Amruthavani fulfilled a papal mandate and played a role in preventing 'one more horrible life of Christ going around'.⁴⁷ This pessimistic assessment of previous films of Jesus' life produced in India was apparently not

⁴³ Franz-Josef Eilers, *Church and Social Communication: Basic Documents*, 2nd ed. (Manila: Logos Publications, 1997), 11.

⁴⁴ Franz-Josef Eilers, *Communicating in Community: An Introduction to Social Communication*, Enl. ed. (Manila: Logos, 1994), 11.

⁴⁵ Herbert Vorgrimler, *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 1 (London and New York: Burns & Oates, Herder & Herder, 1967), 89-104.

⁴⁶ *Inter Mirifica*, Par. 14, in Walter M. Abbott, S.J., ed. *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press; America Press; Association Press, 1966), 319-331. According to Coelho, *Inter Mirifica* informed Balaguer's interest in the Christ film project. Christopher Coelho, interview by author, 16 November 2006, Secunderabad, Andhra Pradesh.

⁴⁷ Coelho, 'How Hindus Filmed the Life of Christ', 17.

isolated to Amruthavani staff. Another critic noted that in previous Indian films Jesus had been depicted 'as a cheap magician', and that the images of his birth and resurrection were Docetic.⁴⁸

Fr. Balaguer's gamble appears to have paid off. The film that in the end became known as *Karunamayudu* was reportedly considered 'theologically sound' in 'Indian ecclesiastical circles'.⁴⁹ Furthermore, scholars, online columnists, and critics to date have generally agreed that it remains the definitive South Indian movie of Jesus' life and has often served as a benchmark against which subsequent Indian movies of Jesus' life have been evaluated.⁵⁰ Collaboration on *Raraju Kristu* also enabled Balaguer to fulfil Amruthavani's specific mandate to develop the 'lively arts for communicating God's truth' in a way that was 'authentic and native'.⁵¹ Additionally, Balaguer influenced the production at a very personal level, becoming an *ad hoc* spiritual adviser to the man who would eventually produce the film and play Jesus. Vijay Chander once said of Balaguer, 'He was Christ to me'.⁵²

The first time I met Fr. Christopher Coelho at his residence in Secunderabad, he recalled two particular objectives that shaped his approach to the screenplay.

I . . . tried to . . . think anew the words of Jesus, because we are familiar with what is written in the Bible . . . and it was easy to copy from the Bible what Jesus said. But, I tried to think, 'If I was Jesus, if I was in that position and I wanted to convey this message, what would, how would I put it?' That way. . . I did some original thinking.⁵³

See, we wanted to produce a Christ for India. That is very consciously in the mind. And, what does that mean? First of all, in India, the

⁴⁸ Sugirtharajah, 19. Doceticism represents the view that Jesus only *appeared* to have a body.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Uma Maheshwari, a scholar of South Indian film, has commented that, '*Karunamayudu* was a really successful Christian mythological in Telugu. There hasn't been another as successful ever since'. personal email to author, Mon, 19 Jun 2006; One need only Google 'Karunamayudu' and 'Vijay Chander' or 'VijayaChandar' to find a variety of references to the film and its legacy. At least two movies of Jesus' life have been produced in South India since the release of *Karunamayudu*: *Shanti Sandesham* (2004), and *Mulla Kireetam* (2006).

⁵¹ www.amruthavani.com/about_us.htm (accessed 15 January 2008).

⁵² Vijay Chander, interview by the author, 16 November 2006, Hyderabad.

⁵³ Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India.

majority of the people go hungry . . . to bed. And . . . they are the people who will . . . ultimately finance the movie. So, we wanted to make the Christ of the poor man. That was very conscious.⁵⁴

In order to do that, he indicated elsewhere, he endeavoured to 'present Christ from the viewpoint of a blind man in the Gospel of Luke – Jesus, the healer, the merciful one. This appeals to our culture'.⁵⁵ He also recalls being given precise instructions to 'make the film for the front benches'.⁵⁶ In other words, to attract the poorest patrons of Indian film-houses who could only afford the wooden benches on a cinema's ground floor. If the movie was popular, they became the most lucrative seats in the house.

Coelho's comments are a reminder that every Jesus film is 'stylized', and that all representations of Jesus are degree made in the image of those who produce them.⁵⁷ They also provide some insight into his objectives for the film. It was not meant to be a 'literal' translation of the biblical text. His original screenplays, for example, did not refer to Jesus' nativity until about a third of the way into the narrative, and then only as a flashback experienced by Mary. Likewise, he was unabashed about his intention to put Jesus' teaching in his own words. Furthermore, his perception that a 'Christ for India' was a 'Christ of the poor man' may have reflected the influence of St Francis of Assisi, his patron saint. The direction notes in his manuscripts also indicate that he intended for Jesus to be portrayed as an Indian.

The first working title for the film was *Raraju Kristu* (Telugu for 'Christ, King of Kings'), a nod to Cecil B. DeMille's classic *The King of Kings* (1927), which is 'quoted' at various points in the final print.⁵⁸ Since Coelho's native tongue was Malayalam, not Telugu, he wrote the screenplay in English. A respected poet and

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ 'Hindu's Jesus Film -- a Hit in India', 1. This focus represents a radical shift from Coelho's original screenplay in at least two regards: the narrative structure of the film, as well as its mix of Matthean and Johanine themes.

⁵⁶ Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India.

⁵⁷ Peter Malone, 'Jesus on Our Screens', in *New Image of Religious Film*, ed. John R. May (London: Sheed & Ward, 1997), 60. On this point, see also Richard Walsh, *Reading the Gospels in the Dark* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), chapter 8.

⁵⁸ I will demonstrate in chapter 4 how *Karunamayudu* was influenced by previous Jesus films, reinforcing Richard Walsh's claim that after the first there were no original Jesus films. Walsh, *Reading the Gospels in the Dark*, 25.

lyricist by the name of Devalupalli Venkata Krishna Shastri (1897-1980) was then hired to translate it into Telugu for production.⁵⁹ For Coelho one of the most enjoyable aspects of the project involved the period between May and September of 1974 during which he developed three drafts of the screenplay.⁶⁰

In chapter 5 I discuss in greater detail the narrative structure and general themes of Coelho's original screenplays, which he later claimed had been 'hacked to pieces'.⁶¹ For now it is sufficient to note that the central problem around which Coelho's narratives turned was that of human suffering and injustice, to which he responded by emphasizing the kingdom of God, Jesus' compassion for all, and the hope Jesus offered in desperate times. The style of Coelho's original scripts reflected Dorothy Sayers's commitment, when developing her 1940s BBC radio series on Jesus, to producing 'realistic Gospel plays' that would 'keep the ancient setting' while giving 'the modern equivalent of the contemporary speech and manners'.⁶² Rather than adhering strictly to the chronological structure of the Gospels, therefore, Coelho's final drafts of the screenplay revolved around Jesus' encounters with five main characters.⁶³

Coelho's screenplays also provide insights into his original vision for the portrayal of Jesus. By way of example, I include an excerpt from his casting notes:

Much of the success or failure of the film will depend on the portrayal of Jesus. He should stand out as a man among men, the most dominant figure in the whole picture. He should dominate the scene not, so much, by his height or other physical qualities, as by his moral strength. He is a man who is totally dedicated to what he knows to be right and will not let himself swerve from it by an inch. On the other hand he is thoroughly human and everyone is at ease in his company.

⁵⁹ Personal email from Christopher Coelho, 03 July, 2007. To the best of my knowledge, Devalupalli Krishna Shastri was a famous Telugu poet, film lyricist and author. Some of his poems can be found in Velcheru Narayana Rao, ed. *Anthology of Telugu Poetry* (London: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁶⁰ These dates are taken from copies of the original scripts by Fr. Christopher Coelho himself; Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India. Coelho, 'How Hindus Filmed the Life of Christ'.17; Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India. In chapter 5 I will discuss some significant differences between Coelho's screenplay and the final cut.

⁶¹ 'Hindu's Jesus Film -- a Hit in India', 8.

⁶² Sayers, 24.

⁶³ Barabbas, John, Mary Magdalene, a blind man named Malachi, and Matthew the tax collector.

He draws out of people the best that is in them – unless they refuse to let him. He is always in perfect control of himself; when he is angry he does not lose his temper, when is with sinners he is cordial but never cheap or chummy. He feels deeply for people. Age 30.⁶⁴

Furthermore, his direction notes reveal a strategy for Indianising Jesus' story. In addition to using local actors and producing the film in South Indian languages, Coelho's strategy consisted mainly of making references to Indian culture in the story. In the first draft, for example, John, who would later become a disciple of Jesus, was to be 'dressed like most Indian fishermen'.⁶⁵ Coinage was described in the Indian currency of rupees.⁶⁶ During an early scene, a fisherman listens to a blind man singing, the precise lyrics of which Coelho suggested were to be 'left to a Telugu poet'.⁶⁷ Confronted by people who thought they did not need baptism because they were children of Abraham, John the Baptist replied, 'You think you have a right on God and on his justification because you were born into a particular family. . . . Your family background and your *caste* are not going to bring you God's benevolence'.⁶⁸

Yet if Coelho was keen to Indianise Jesus, he was not so eager to employ certain conventions common to Indian cinema in the effort. The front matter of his second draft included 'A few notes on THE ACTING' in which he distinguished between acting on stage and in front of the camera. His emphasis was on 'restraint!', the lack of which, he argued, was a 'major drawback in acting on the Indian screen, particularly that of the South'.⁶⁹ That said, he was not necessarily keen for his cast to act 'along western lines. We use our hands while talking a great deal more than they do, say, in Northern Europe'.⁷⁰ In contrast to what he perceived as a prevailing tendency in India for people to use flat lighting and excessive make-up in order to

⁶⁴ Christopher Coelho (O.F.M.), 'Story, Dialogues and Screenplay, Along with Direction Notes for Karunama[sic]Yudu (Final Version)', (1974), 2.

⁶⁵ Christopher Coelho (O.F.M.), *First Draft for the Screenplay of Karunamayudu* (1974), 1.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 51.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 3.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 11. Emphasis mine.

⁶⁹ Christopher Coelho (O.F.M.), 'Story, Dialogues and Screenplay for Karunamayudu Along with Direction Notes (Second Draft)', (Secunderabad: 1974), 8.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

make themselves look lighter, he argued, 'there is no reason why the characters should be made to look like Europeans'.⁷¹

Despite his best intentions, however, Coelho could not avoid the influence of long standing visual traditions. In addition to writing the screenplay and overseeing the casting for the film, he also wore the mantle of co-director, a role that would have forced him to wrestle with questions that have plagued all attempts to portray Jesus on screen, including the question of Jesus' facial features.⁷² Despite Coelho's desire to present a Christ for India, however, he claims to have been pleased that Chander's face resembled the Western visual traditions of representing Christ.⁷³ Coelho's rationale in this regard gives some pause. Despite all purported efforts to present Jesus' story authentically, he has been played often by a Western Caucasian male.⁷⁴ Even the most 'literal' cinematic adaptations of the Gospels—John Krish and Peter Sykes' *Jesus* (1979), Phillip Saville's *The Gospel of John* (2003) and Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004)—have adhered closely to this tradition.⁷⁵

One might have expected that given an unprecedented opportunity to innovate, Coelho would have encouraged the casting of an actor that appeared less Caucasian. Yet makers of Jesus films have always recognized that a film made for commercial consumption cannot risk too radical a departure from received traditions if it is to succeed at the box office.⁷⁶ The visual tradition of Jesus in India has long standing affinities with the West. Images of Christ like that on the poster in Fig. 1, which was purchased at the Amruthavani bookshop, are commonplace, featured on

⁷¹ Ibid., 9.

⁷² For an introduction to the various decisions with which makers of Jesus films have had to contend, see the introductory material to Baugh; Tatum.

⁷³ Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India. In this sense, he, perhaps unknowingly had much in common with Franco Zeffirelli who claims to have cast Robert Powell to play Jesus because of his eyes. Martin Goodsmith, 'Jesus Christ: Movie Star', (UK: 1992). I do not know whether Coelho had a choice as to who would play Jesus, given that Chander had already been cast in the role for Raju's film.

⁷⁴ I refer here to movies that attempt to represent Jesus in his original context. Otherwise, the South African film, *Son of Man* (2006), could be considered a significant exception to this claim.

⁷⁵ In a telephone interview with the author, John Heyman, producer of *Jesus* (1979), indicated that despite all his efforts to make the film historically authentic, his decision to use English actor Brian Deacon was because he would be easier to work with. John Heyman, telephone interview with the author, 11 April 2005, Edinburgh, Scotland.

⁷⁶ Baugh, 5.

calendars, stickers, cards and other products for sale at a variety of outlets.⁷⁷

Chander's features were consistent with this tradition, and he was often pictured in the movie cloaked in a white tunic with a red shawl in similar fashion to the poster



Fig. 1 - A poster of Jesus purchased at Amruthavani in Hyderabad, India, 2006.

(compare Fig. 1 and Fig. 2).⁷⁸ Since upper caste Hindus and Muslims have tended to dominate the film industry in India, it may also have been difficult to find seasoned actors from other castes to play the part of Jesus.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, for the purpose of this project, it is significant to note that despite efforts to portray Jesus as Indian, the casting of Jesus in *Karunamayudu* was heavily informed by Western visual traditions imported to India.

Furthermore, it was not only painted or printed representations of Jesus that influenced the portrayal of Jesus in *Karunamayudu*. After my first

screening of the film I was convinced that whoever had produced it must have been familiar with Western movies of Jesus' life. In particular, the inclusion of Barabbas and Judas as zealots seemed to be an allusion to Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings* (1961).⁸⁰

According to Coelho, however, my speculation was only partly accurate. In addition to the Western fine arts



Fig. 2 - A photo of Fr. Christopher Coelho (left) and Vijay Chander (right) during the production of *Karunamayudu*. Image reproduced by permission of Christopher Coelho.

⁷⁷ As Daniel Smith argues, 'god posters' include a range of images of divinities, saints and sacred sites. H. Daniel Smith, 'The Effects Of 'God Posters' On Hindus and Their Devotional Traditions', in *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia*, ed. Lawrence A. Babb and Susan Snow Wadley (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 29-30.

⁷⁸ For more on the conversation about representations of Jesus in other cultures, see Volker Kèuster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ: Intercultural Christology* (London: SCM, 2001). On the whiteness of Jesus, see James H. Cone, 'Theology's Great Sin: Silence in the Face of White Supremacy', *Black Theology* 2, no. 2 (2004); Clive Marsh, 'Black Christs in White Christian Perspective: Some Critical Reflections', *Black Theology* 2, no. 1 (2004).

⁷⁹ Rachel Dwyer, *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 136-148, 159-161.

⁸⁰ Friesen.

tradition of representing Christ, Coelho has acknowledged several other Western influences on his screenplay. These included a concept outline provided by founder of Amruthavani Hans Wijngaards, Dorothy L. Sayers' BBC radio plays, published as *The Man Born to Be King*, and his personal viewing of select biblical / Roman epics, including DeMille's *King of Kings* (1927) and *Barabbas* (1962).⁸¹ Coelho insisted, however, that he had never seen Ray's film.⁸² Instead, he suggested to me that the movie *Barabbas*, and Pèar Lagerkvist's novel from which the movie was adapted, might have influenced his imagination.⁸³

Following completion of the drafts, shooting began with an initial production schedule of three months.⁸⁴ At the time film production in India followed a fairly predictable process, though not as streamlined as the classical Hollywood cinema so carefully analyzed by David Bordwell, et al.⁸⁵ Production on most films began without all of the necessary funding in hand. Potential distributors were shown the first few reels of a film and if they thought it would be viable in their region they would invest in its completion.⁸⁶ In the case of *Karunamayudu*, however, distributors were reportedly hesitant to invest since the Roman Catholic Church had provided the start-up funds and they assumed there was more money in Church coffers. Therefore, after one month of shooting, only three of the anticipated six reels were completed and the start-up funds had dried up.⁸⁷ Two years later, after failing to impress distributors and secure additional funding, Raju turned over rights to the film, along

⁸¹ Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Man Born to Be King: A Play-Cycle on the Life of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (London: Gollancz, 1943); Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India; personal email correspondence, 28 May, 2006. Based on a personal email to the author (28 May 2006), I conclude that Coelho had not seen *Godspell* (1973) or *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) before writing his script.

⁸² Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February, 2006.

⁸³ Christopher Coelho, personal email to the author, 28 May, 2006. By contrast, Chander claims that he had not seen any other films of Christ's life, Indian or foreign, prior to commencing the project so that he would not be influenced by the work of others. Sugirtharajah: 18.

⁸⁴ Fr. Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India.

⁸⁵ Cf., David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985). Cf. Philip Lutgendorf, 'Is There an Indian Way of Filmmaking?', *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 10, no. 3 (2006).

⁸⁶ Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India. For more on financing patterns in the industry, see Tejaswini Ganti, *Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema*, Routledge Film Guidebooks (New York, London: Routledge, 2004), chapter 2.

⁸⁷ Coelho, 'How Hindus Filmed the Life of Christ', 17.

with negatives and other related materials, to Amruthavani. Krishnamoorthy and the cameraman were dismissed on grounds of incompetence.⁸⁸

Given the central focus of this study it should be noted that despite the film's genesis in the minds of ostensibly Hindu filmmakers, the first chapter in *Karunamayudu's* production history was dominated by the influence of Roman Catholicism. That influence, in turn, was vetted primarily through the personal history, tastes, and theological inclinations of Fr. Christopher Coelho. In the second stage of production, the locus of influence shifted considerably.

2.2 Stage two - *Karunamayudu* (1976-1978)

Following Raju's resignation, the production of *Karunamayudu* may well have been terminated had Vijay Chander not stepped forward to shoulder the additional responsibility of producing the film. The second chapter in the film's production history was marked by two significant shifts. The working title of the movie was changed from *Raraju Kristu* to *Karunamayudu* in order to avoid legal challenges from the previous production team.⁸⁹ Furthermore, Vijay Chander emerged as the central figure in *Karunamayudu's* production history. A brief biographical sketch of Chander's life in the years leading up to his role in *Karunamayudu* sheds some light on the context that informed his portrayal of Jesus and his commitment to the film's production.

Vijay Chander was born in Andhra Pradesh to an orthodox Brahmin family of considerable repute. His grandfather, Tanguturi Prakasam Pantulu (1872-1957) or Andhra Kesari ('Lion of Andhra') is a household name in Andhra Pradesh for his role as an Indian freedom fighter, peer of Mohatma Gandhi, and first Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh.⁹⁰ Chander's aunt, Tanguturi Surya Kumari (1925-2005) is attributed

⁸⁸ Ibid., 17.

⁸⁹ Ibid; 'At this point the new name 'Karunamayudu' was chosen for two reasons: it was seen as being less prosaic, and secondly it was feared that A.S. Raju and Krishnamoorthy might give us trouble from the point of view of copyrights. As a matter of fact they did try this (I[sic]ve forgotten the details) and we had to settle things outside of courts'. Christopher Coelho, personal email to the author, 21 Apr 2006.

⁹⁰ Sathavahana. and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tanguturi_Prakasam (accessed 30 October 2006).

with singing one of the most famous of Telugu songs, 'Telugu Talliki Mallepoodanda'.⁹¹ Although Chander divulged little about his family, it seems that despite their Brahmin heritage they were not opposed to Christianity. His father reportedly mortgaged some land in order to finance the completion of *Karunamayudu*.⁹²

Prior to his involvement in cinema, Chander had been a stage actor. He initially accepted the role of playing Christ as a way of making a name for himself, but it was a risky career move.⁹³ Popular South Indian film star M.G. Ramachandran (MGR) had tried to produce a Jesus film several years earlier.⁹⁴ For reasons that I have not been able to verify, however, it appears that the film was never completed. Furthermore, it was rumoured in the industry that to play Jesus in film was to jeopardize one's career.⁹⁵ Some people seem to have taken this superstition quite literally. An informant from Tamil Nadu told me that he had encountered people in some rural communities in South India who still believed that the actor who played Jesus in *Karunamayudu* died immediately following the movie's completion.⁹⁶ At any rate, it was a risky decision.

When asked what inspired him, an 'orthodox Hindu' to produce a film about Jesus Chander explained by giving the following illustration:

It's like this. A child falls into a well and cries for help. Suddenly one man jumps in and rescues the child. Everybody says, what a great thing he has done. But the man mutters to himself, 'Who pushed me in'? Like this man I was also pushed in, though in my case it was not the people who pressed me. But some unseen, mysterious, supernatural force.⁹⁷

⁹¹ Ibid; Bill Harpe, 'Surya Kumari' <http://www.guardian.co.uk/india/story/0,12559,1486436,00.html> (accessed 23 June 2007).

⁹² Vijay Chander, interview by the author, 16 November 2006, Hyderabad.

⁹³ Sathavahana.

⁹⁴ C.R.W. David, *Cinema as Medium of Communication in Tamilnadu* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1983), 39; Forrester, 288. To the best of my knowledge, however, MGR's film was never completed.

⁹⁵ Sathavahana.

⁹⁶ Personal conversation, Mutaraj, 06 June, 2007, New College, Edinburgh.

⁹⁷ Sugirtharajah, 18.

It is not immediately obvious whether Chander associated that mysterious force with Jesus, although he later claimed to have been compelled by a mystical encounter with Jesus. In his own words,

Unknowingly, a sacred feeling filled in me immediately after I took the role as Christ for the first time. I even experienced the divine Jesus descend from the heavens and invoke himself into me and spread all over.⁹⁸

Chander's experience of playing Jesus, however, was not always pleasant. Not only did he suffer ridicule from his peers, he occasionally found himself arguing with Jesus:

Why did you create an urge to play your role in me? Why are you taking acid test of me, who is committed to do your character? Are you really there? And so on went the struggle, as a son fights with his father. Every moment I was in the heat of interacting with Jesus, fighting with him arguing and loving him. This entire internal struggle, which I realised later, drew me more and more closer to Him.⁹⁹

Chander's language of encounter, devotion, and fusion with the divine is common in South Indian dramatic arts, especially in the classical dance (*nritya*) and stage traditions. According to Hindu tradition these traditions were divinely ordained by, and meant to represent, the life of the gods.¹⁰⁰ Given Chander's previous experience in theatre, it may be that he had been influenced by these traditions. On the other hand, his emotive language is also characteristic of *bhakti yoga*, or the devotional path to God in Indian spiritual traditions. *Bhakti* is generally understood as a path to God that is 'available to all and not requiring any external aids', generally

⁹⁸ Sathavahana. See also Vaasanthi.

⁹⁹ Sathavahana.

¹⁰⁰ K.N. Sitaram, 'Indian Dancing: With Special Reference to Its Hinduistic Aspects', *Indian Arts and Letters* ix, no. 1 (1935), 33-35.

'more accessible than the path of knowledge or of works'.¹⁰¹ Since *bhakti*, by its very nature tends to be more accessible to the illiterate and therefore more attuned to oral traditions, Chander's approach to the representation of Jesus may have been somewhat at odds with Coelho's emphasis on the teachings of Jesus. It would be too simplistic, however, to imply that Coelho was the cerebral and Chander the more emotive of the two. After all, Coelho was an artist, poet and musician. Furthermore, the blind man who posed the most philosophical questions in Coelho's screenplays found his doubts about Jesus resolved in part by being cured of physical blindness, not through rational discourse. Nevertheless, as a review of the film in subsequent chapters will demonstrate, there were significant differences in their agendas for the film.

Chander's decision to take responsibility for producing the film was a bold move, given that the initial seed money provided by the Roman Catholic Church was already spent. In a spontaneous outburst he also vowed publicly not to take another role in the film industry until he had completed the movie.¹⁰² What he could not have anticipated at the time was how long the project would take. The original three-month shooting schedule extended to over four and a half years, due primarily to the daunting challenge of securing funds.¹⁰³ He is adamant that during his tenure as producer he did not receive one rupee of free money, especially not from Christian organizations.¹⁰⁴ Not only did he sell his own property to raise funds, on one occasion he even resorted to playing the lottery, winning 30,000 rupees that he immediately ploughed back into expenses.¹⁰⁵ He also dabbled in the garment industry. On one occasion when a large order was rejected, he used the material for

¹⁰¹ Milton Singer, 'The Radha-Krishna 'Bhajans' Of Madras City', *History of Religions* 2, no. 2 (1963): 199.

¹⁰² I have yet to determine precisely when Chander made this vow and when he publicized it.

¹⁰³ Coelho, 'How Hindus Filmed the Life of Christ', 17. There is some discrepancy about key dates in the film's history. John Gilman, who eventually purchased distribution rights to the film claims that Vijay 'sensed God compelling him to make the film in 1973', the same year Gilman sensed divine affirmation of a call to India. Gilman, 30. Chander made a similar claim in an online interview about the film, where he refers to his involvement with the film under A.S. Raju as beginning in 1973. See Sathavahana. Yet, all the other information I have gleaned so far suggests that Raju and Krishnamoorthy only began production after receiving funding in 1974. Furthermore, in a personal email, dated 26 June, 2006, Coelho states that, 'every bit of evidence seems to point to my having joined Amruthavani and started working on *Karunamayudu* in the early months of 1974 and the film being released in December, 1978 – just 4 and a half years of agony for me!!'

¹⁰⁴ Vijay Chander, interview by the author, 16 November 2006, Hyderabad.

¹⁰⁵ Sugirtharajah, 18.

costumes in the film.¹⁰⁶ As noted above, his father even mortgaged some property to help him secure a loan from an American Baptist missionary by the name of Dr. Louis Knoll.¹⁰⁷ Yet despite these financial challenges Chander claims to have spared little expense and has argued that delays in production can be attributed in part to his own high standards for the movie.

Indeed, because of his industry connections, Chander's move into the role of producer brought a new level of sophistication to the project. One of the most significant decisions he made was to recruit A. Bhimsingh as director.¹⁰⁸ It seemed an auspicious choice. Bhimsingh was an accomplished director in Telugu cinema, with over sixty films to his credit.¹⁰⁹ Sadly, however, he fell ill before most of the outdoor scenes were shot and was only responsible for about ten days of filming.¹¹⁰ His last contribution to the movie was to direct what became its establishing scene, the angel Gabriel's annunciation to Mary. Bhimsingh's son stepped into his father's shoes for four days, but then R. Thirumalai took over as director for the remainder of the production.¹¹¹ Both Coelho and Chander have spoken glowingly of Thirumalai's contribution to the film, yet reportedly He seldom made decisions without Chander's approval and his influence has received little public recognition.¹¹² Chander's strong hand in the film's production during the second stage in *Karunamayudu's* production

¹⁰⁶ Sathavahana. This may explain the varied and colourful costumes in the movie.

¹⁰⁷ Vijay Chander, interview by the author, 16 November 2006, Hyderabad. Knoll's relationship to the film deserves more attention. According to comments from Fr. Raymond Ambroise in a personal email to the author (20 February 2008) he played a critical role in funding the film, thereby involving the Church of South India in the history of the film.

¹⁰⁸ Also spelled Bheem Singh.

¹⁰⁹ For a filmography of Bhimsingh, see <http://www.spicebrisbane.org/showPerson.php?p=14064> (accessed 20 February 2007).

¹¹⁰ Thanks to Jason Goode for drawing my attention to the possibility that the film had multiple directors. According to Chander, Bhimsingh died soon after. Vijay Chander, interview by the author, 16 November 2006, Hyderabad; Interestingly, however, Bheemsingh is attributed with directing a movie entitled *Evaru Devadu* in 1981. Perhaps it was a movie he had initiated before he died. <http://www.spicebrisbane.org/showMovie.php?m=16737> (accessed 20 Feb 07). The Internet Movie dataBase lists Bhimsingh's date of death as 16 Jan 1978.

¹¹¹ In a personal email to the author (25 May 2006), Christopher Coelho indicates that Thirumalai was Bheem Singh's brother-in-law.

¹¹² Vijay Chander, interview by the author, 16 November 2006, Hyderabad.

history was a source of consternation for Coelho, who chafed at the way his initial designation as co-director was frequently downplayed.¹¹³

The advert below for a Tamil version of the film (Fig. 3) confirms the redistribution of responsibilities engineered by Chander. Although Thirumalai



Fig. 3 – An advertisement for the Tamil version of the film, reproduced from Sugirtharajah, R.S. 'Indian Cowboy, Hindu Christ', *One World*, no. 49 (1979): 18-19. Reproduced by permission from *One World*.

receives equal billing for direction, Bhimsingh's name is given priority and he continues to be listed as director in various reference works and databases related to Indian cinema, not to mention DVD versions of the film.¹¹⁴ Coelho is listed as co-director in smaller print and his contribution to the screenplay is not acknowledged. Instead, 'dialogues' are attributed to

Devanarayanan, a man well known in South Indian cinema for his dubbing and editing skills.¹¹⁵ Adding insult to injury, the credits in the film itself attribute the screenplay to a Modukuri Johnson.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ That tensions existed between Coelho and Chander is corroborated by personal correspondence with Fr. Raymond Ambrose, also in an administrative role at Amruthavani at the time. Fr. Raymond Ambrose, personal email to the author, 20 February 2008.

¹¹⁴ Ashish Rajadhyaksha and others, *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema*, New rev. ed. (London: British Film Institute, Oxford University Press, 1999), 608. See also <http://www.imdb.com>; <http://www.spicebrisbane.org/showMovie.php?m=19438> (accessed 22 February 2009)

¹¹⁵ <http://www.hindu.com/2006/08/07/stories/2006080701540200.htm> (accessed 26 June 2007). It may be that Devanarayanan only participated in dubbing the film into Tamil, since his name is only associated with this poster featuring the Tamil title for *Karunamayudu*.

Modukuri Johnson (or Johnson Modukuri) was hired by Chander to translate Coelho's script from English to Telugu, apparently replacing the services of Devalupalli Krishnaswamy employed during the first stage of production. Johnson was well known in the industry for his film dialogues, and had worked closely with a variety of South Indian film stars.¹¹⁷ Yet it was Johnson's desire to craft the script according to local conventions that made him a thorn in Coelho's side—that, and his different opinions about how Jesus and the gospels should be reproduced on screen. According to Coelho, Chander hired Johnson because he could be relied on to provide a more 'scriptural style' to the dialogue.¹¹⁸ That rationale in itself must have seemed a slap in the face of a trained scholar and theologian like Coelho. To Coelho's consternation, Johnson's style ran counter to his own desire to put new words in Jesus' mouth. In one of my initial interviews with Coelho, he made the following comment about Johnson:

If he was a Hindu . . . the story of Christ would have been completely new to him. He would have translated my ideas exactly as they were. But this man, being a Protestant, . . . and being familiar with his Bible, he put them all back in the biblical language.¹¹⁹

Those may seem like odd words from a devoted Roman Catholic priest who had studied Latin, philosophy and theology, wanted to Indianise representations of Jesus, and was keen to put his own words in Jesus' mouth. Yet they hint at the conceptual, interpersonal and theological tensions that marked the film's production. Perhaps most glaring is Coelho's hasty generalization about Hindus. Christians may be in the minority in India, but any attentive observer who has walked the streets of a South Indian city is sure to have encountered shrines devoted to Jesus or posters for Christian evangelistic meetings. Furthermore, it has been argued that critical Christological discourse in India did not originate in the Church, but with Hindu

¹¹⁶ On the other hand, as Philip Lutgendorf argues, 'Screenplay and dialog are often authored by different persons' in Indian cinema, reflecting a 'generally looser cultural notion of 'authorship' as well as the (already noted) high valuation of rhetorical art'. Lutgendorf, 241.

¹¹⁷ For a review of Johnson's filmography and contributions to Telugu cinema visit: www.imdb.com

¹¹⁸ Christopher Coelho, personal email to author, 28 June 2007.

¹¹⁹ Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India.

intellectuals.¹²⁰ It is therefore dubious to suggest that the story of Jesus would have been altogether new to any Hindu. More likely Coelho meant to imply that had Johnson been unfamiliar with the details of Jesus' story he would not have challenged Coelho's approach. Whereas Coelho wanted to be creative, however, Johnson's ostensibly Protestant heritage reportedly his efforts to retain a more literal translation of the text.

Equally troubling to Coelho was Johnson's desire to craft the film in the very style of the 'cheap movies' for which Coelho had such contempt. To Coelho's chagrin, Johnson seemed keen to make Jesus into a Telugu cinema hero, a character commonly understood as 'the boss'.¹²¹ According to Coelho, at one point, following a fight scene, Jesus was to appear and everyone was to say, 'Look . . . quiet'. In other words, Jesus' appearance was meant to command an, 'unrealistic kind of subordination'. One must keep in mind that these are the words of a disappointed man whose vision for the film was slowly undermined over the course of its production. Nevertheless, tensions between the two men marked the remainder of the film's production. Every morning during filming Coelho would request that the translated script for the day's shooting be read back to him in English. Invariably he found himself insisting, 'That's not it! That's not what I wanted', and he would then attempt to make changes without Johnson knowing. If Johnson found him out, disagreements inevitably ensued. Thus, Coelho's vision for the film was never fully realized, a vision that he once half-jokingly remarked to Chander could have won the film an Oscar. In retrospect, however, Coelho has mused that perhaps in some efficacious way, those years of frustration contributed to the spiritual value and power of the film.¹²²

Chander makes no apology for giving Johnson such free reign. Although he claims to have nothing but respect for Coelho's depth of biblical knowledge and way with words, Chander estimated that Coelho's script would have required five hundred

¹²⁰ Robin H. S. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1969), 19; M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1969), 2.

¹²¹ Details in this paragraph all from Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India.

¹²² See chapter 4; 123-124.

feet of film per page. The result would have been an eleven or twelve hour epic.¹²³ Chander explained that he was not interested in making a documentary about Jesus but a movie that would interest people. In order to bring the film's running time within the conventional three hours expected of feature films, therefore, some editing and compression of the film's narrative was inevitable. He claims that he needed to work with someone who knew how to do that. Perhaps in an effort to smooth over old inter-personal conflicts, Chander has insisted that 'no one can take the credit for *Karunamayudu*, because Jesus is the producer, the director and made everyone to act according to his way'.¹²⁴

Adding to the tensions that marked the film's production is Coelho's claim that he experienced some resistance from his Hindu peers over how Jesus' teaching ought to be represented.¹²⁵ In Matthew 28:18-20, just before ascending into the clouds, Jesus reportedly told his disciples to disperse throughout the world, preaching the gospel, baptizing people and teaching them to do everything that Jesus commanded. Coelho was convinced that his Hindu peers would likely react to the 'baptism thing' so he left it out. He also claimed that they wouldn't accept, 'Teach them the things I taught you. That means missionary', and therefore changed Jesus' words in the film to: 'Go to the whole world, and live the way I taught you to live—something like that'.¹²⁶

When I asked Chander about Coelho's assertions he chuckled. If baptism was a problem, Chander replied, why was the story of John the Baptist included? Furthermore, Chander asserted that Coelho never raised the 'missionary' issue with him, and since Fr. Balaguer never mentioned it, he had never been aware of any such misgivings on Coelho's part.¹²⁷ In my view it is also curious that Coelho was so

¹²³ Vijay Chander, interview by the author, 16 November 2006, Hyderabad. Perhaps that was Coelho's objective. Fr. Raymond Ambroise, who was Executive Director of Amruthavani at the time the film was produced, informed me that Coelho wanted to make an artistic film like Zeffirelli's. Fr. Raymond Ambroise, personal email to author, 20 February 2008.

¹²⁴ Vijay Chander, interview by the author, 16 November 2006, Hyderabad.

¹²⁵ Coelho, 'How Hindus Filmed the Life of Christ', 17-18.

¹²⁶ In contrast to, 'Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age'. (Matt 28:19-20; New International Version); Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India.

¹²⁷ Vijay Chander, interview by the author, 16 November 2006, Hyderabad. To the best of my knowledge the correspondence between Frs Coelho and Balaguer has, unfortunately, been disposed of. Fr. Raymond Ambroise, personal email to author, 20 February 2008.

bothered by this adaptation of Jesus' words, given his own expressed desire to paraphrase the teachings of Jesus.

In addition to Chander and Coelho's leading contributions, not to mention those of Johnson and Thirumalai (the second main director), a few other key players in the production of *Karunamayudu* should be acknowledged. If the film began its first stage with a relatively inexperienced crew, it did not finish that way. Joseph (or Krishna) Fernandez, director of music, was reputedly a Christian musician who was well known by his industry name, Krishna.¹²⁸ B. Gopalam assisted him.¹²⁹ Cinematography was by K.S. Prasad, who had received the National Film Award for Best Cinematography (Colour) in 1969.¹³⁰ Special effects were rendered by Ravi Nagaich (1931-1991), who had already directed several Hindi films by that time.¹³¹ For the most part Chander was pleased with Nagaich's work, although the scenes of Jesus' disciples in a boat on a stormy sea, and his ascension both failed to meet Chander's expectations.¹³²

Regrettably, little more can be said at this point about the technical and logistical details of the film's production. According to Chander most of it was shot on 35 mm RVO stock, with a few scenes done in Eastman Kodak.¹³³ The camera was an old Mitchell, although Chander was unable to recall the precise model. Mostly tracking shots were used, interspersed with the occasional zoom shot.¹³⁴ Even less can be said about the audio production at this point, save the attribution already given above to key persons.

¹²⁸ Sathavahana; Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India.

¹²⁹ *Karunamayudu* (1978), DVD jacket.

¹³⁰ 'Best Cinematography - National Film Awards'. http://entertainment.indianetzone.com/films/1/best_cinematography.htm (accessed 26 January 2009).

¹³¹ Vijay Chander, interview by the author, 16 November 2006, Hyderabad. Ravi Nagaich reportedly served as cinematographer for Chander's next film, *Rajadhi Raju* (1980), <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0619102> (accessed 16 June 2007).

¹³² Vijay Chander, interview by the author, 16 November 2006, Hyderabad. Others share his disappointment. John Gilman has stated that he did not particularly like the scenes of the descent of the dove during Jesus' baptism or the boat on the stormy sea. John Gilman, interview by the author, 04 July, 2005, Three Bridges, London, UK. Some recent DVD versions of the film released by Dayspring International omit the scene with the disciples in the boat.

¹³³ To date I have been unable to find information about the manufacturer of this particular brand of film identified by Chander. Apparently, however, colour film in Andhra Pradesh was in short supply. The government argued it was not necessary since Telugu films were not attracting foreign markets. G. Sri Hari, 'Centre Will not Give Them Colour', *Filmfare* 1977.

¹³⁴ I interrogate the film in detail in the subsequent chapter.

Most of the film was shot near Madras, now known as Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu. This is not surprising since for many years, Chennai (in Tamil Nadu) was a major production centre for Telugu movies.¹³⁵ The Jerusalem scenes were filmed at B'hairava Palem, Macharla, in the Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh, around sets constructed from Coelho's sketches of Jerusalem's walls and temple.¹³⁶ Although most of the outdoor scenes were purportedly shot prior to the indoor ones, the Last Supper was reportedly the very first scene to be filmed.¹³⁷ When the film was completed, a producer from Kerala state expressed interest in collaborating on the translation of the film, which made it possible to release it simultaneously in Telugu (Andhra Pradesh) and Malayalam (Kerala). This was a welcome development, since the offer to collaborate was accompanied by an injection of funding in the final stages of the project.¹³⁸

In the end, the production team's perseverance nearly came to nought on account of apprehension among members of the local censorship board about the graphic portrayal of Jesus' crucifixion. According to Chander and Coelho it went beyond the pale of acceptable depictions of violence for the cinema. Suddenly at risk were nearly five years of dogged perseverance. To Chander's relief, the Roman Catholic archbishop of Madras and a number of Protestant leaders intervened to sway the board's decision. Coelho reported that the archbishop of Madras (Chennai) argued that the contemplation of Christ's suffering was a virtuous activity for Christians.¹³⁹ Leaders of a number of other Christian organizations also backed the film.¹⁴⁰ In the end, the censors relented and on 21 December, 1978, the film was approved for release by Radha Chitra Studios, one of Chander's business

¹³⁵ Yves Thoraval, *The Cinemas of India: 1896-2000* (Delhi: Macmillan India, 2000), 345.

¹³⁶ Sathavahana; Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India.

¹³⁷ Vijay Chander, interview by the author, 16 November 2006, Hyderabad. I believe this refers to the second round of production.

¹³⁸ Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India. In slight contrast to Coelho's claim, Chander claims that the film was originally made in three South Indian languages: Telugu, Tamil, and Malayalam. Sathavahana.

¹³⁹ Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India.

¹⁴⁰ Vijay Chander, interview by the author, 16 November 2006, Hyderabad.

enterprises,¹⁴¹ Final production cost for the film was three million rupees, an astonishing amount in those days.¹⁴²

3. Conclusion

The above account of *Karunamayudu*'s production history may be the most comprehensive currently available. Even so, many details remain untold. Like all Jesus movies before it, *Karunamayudu* was the product of myriad negotiations concerned with portraying Jesus on screen for a paying audience in a particular context. Unlike its Western predecessors, however, the makers of *Karunamayudu* rendered those decisions in a context where Christianity was not a dominant cultural force. Furthermore, the religious and theological influences that shaped the production of *Karunamayudu* were multiple, the most formative of which were the traditions of Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, and Hinduism. By reviewing the negotiations involved in the making of the film, this account serves as a reminder that the relationship between film, religion, and theology is not only bound up with cultural contexts alone. At stake in its production were political loyalties, commitments to various communities of faith and interpretation, and the perceived expectations of potential viewers whose cinematic tastes were informed by the dynamics of South Indian cinema. To appreciate more fully the tensions and personal agendas that marked the composition of *Karunamayudu*'s portrayal of Jesus, therefore, it is imperative to have some knowledge of Indian cinema history. It is to that subject that I turn in the next chapter.

¹⁴¹ Vijay claims that Radha Radha was the name of a girl that Vijay knew in school. Chitra is a common Telugu term for film. Vijay Chander, interview by the author, 16 November 2006, Hyderabad.

¹⁴² Sugirtharajah, 18. Approximately £42,226.60 by current exchange rates.

CHAPTER FOUR

Indian cinema as context for *Karunamayudu*

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter I recounted in some detail the negotiation of theological or religious traditions and personal agendas that marked the production of *Karunamayudu*. I also noted in conclusion that those negotiations were informed by the ways the film's principals understood and evaluated Indian cinema. A cursory understanding of the dynamics of Indian cinema, therefore, is key understanding the tensions that marked *Karunamayudu*'s content, subsequent appropriation for evangelism, and reception. Although the question of what Indian cinema *is* or *ought to be* is inextricable from debates about what it means to be Indian, the complexities of 'Indianness' are too involved to be addressed here.¹ The more pertinent issue for this project is to understand how those involved with *Karunamayudu* understood its significance as an Indian film. Therefore, I begin by addressing the definition of Indian cinema. I then discuss briefly, and in turn, the relationship between religion and Indian cinema, a number of the industry's key characteristics, and the broader cultural context in which *Karunamayudu* was produced. I conclude by revisiting the question of how *Karunamayudu* was perceived by Vijay Chander, who produced the film and played Jesus, and Fr. Christopher Coelho, who wrote the film's original screenplay.

¹ K. Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake, *Indian Popular Cinema: A Narrative of Cultural Change*, Revised and Updated ed. (Stoke on Trent, UK: Trentham Books, 2004), 2. Italics mine.

2. Defining Indian Cinema²

Over the course of this project I have been repeatedly asked two questions about *Karunamayudu*, especially by Western acquaintances: Is it a Bollywood film? Why would someone from India make a movie about Jesus? Both questions reflect hasty generalizations about the industry, the basis of which I will address in the next few paragraphs. The first reflects an all too common caricature of Indian cinema, and the second reflects an assumption about the industry's relationship to Indian culture and religion. As the following review of Indian cinema history indicates, however, Indian cinema is a complex industry; *Karunamayudu* is not, strictly speaking, a Bollywood film. Nor, given the close relationship between film and religion in the history of the industry, is it surprising that Indian filmmakers might have considered a movie about Jesus to be commercially viable.

The phrase 'Indian cinema' is often used interchangeably with 'Bollywood', or 'Hindi film', to describe the massive industry responsible for the 800–1000 films released in India each year. Such a conflation of terms is not entirely unjustified. 'Bollywood' is commonly associated with Bombay cinema, which produces mostly Hindi films, widely recognized as 'replete with mindless songs and dances, star-crossed lovers, ostentatious celebrations of glamour and spectacle, lost and found brothers, convenient coincidence and happy endings'.³ Given the ubiquity of the Hindi language in India, the association of Hindi—or Bollywood—films with Indian cinema is understandable.

As Vijay Mishra has argued, however, 'there is no simple theory of Bombay (Bollywood) Cinema'.⁴ The etymology of 'Bollywood', for example, is not as straightforward as it appears. According to Derek Bose, the term evolved from an early reference to movies produced by Tollygunge Studios in Calcutta. These films earned the moniker of Tollywood by virtue of their similarity to Western films. Consequently, one theory is that similar word plays eventually led to Bombay

² Portions of this essay are excerpts from Dwight Friesen, '*Karunamayudu*: Seeing Christ Anew in Indian Cinema', in *Images of the Word: Hollywood's Bible and Beyond*, ed. David Shepherd (Atlanta: SBL, 2008).

³ Derek Bose, *Brand Bollywood: A New Global Entertainment Order* (New Delhi: Sage, 2006), 11.

⁴ Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), xviii.

cinema being referred to as Bollywood.⁵ Tejaswini Ganti has asserted, alternatively, that Bollywood is a 'tongue-in-cheek term created by the English-language press in the late 1970s'.⁶

Regardless, the misguided tendency to equate the whole of India's cinema industry with films made in Mumbai (Bollywood) is complicated by a closer look at its regional diversity and the cinematic styles with which it has been associated. Bollywood, despite the ubiquity of its products in India and around the world, is only responsible for about 20% of the movies made in India.⁷ The remainder are produced in 16-20 languages by at least six other major regional production centres: Karnataka (Kannada), Kerala (Malayalam), Tamil Nadu (Tamil), Andhra Pradesh (Telugu), Maharashtra (Marathi) and Bengal (Bengali).⁸ The tendency to equate Indian cinema with Bollywood is complicated further by the recognition that the industry has been associated with two distinct approaches to filmmaking. The formulaic *masala* (spicy) films that have dominated the industry represent but one of two major trajectories in Indian filmmaking. The nation also developed its own 'parallel' or 'new-wave' cinema, most commonly associated with Satyajit Ray, considered by many to be India's first 'internationally acclaimed film director'.⁹ As film historian and critic Yves Thoraval has asserted, it is more accurate to speak in the plural of India's cinemas.¹⁰ In short, *Karunamayudu* is a Telugu film, not a Bollywood product.

Given the regional and stylistic nuances that have marked Indian cinema, one can appreciate that Chander and Coelho may have held different opinions about how Jesus ought to be portrayed in Indian cinema. What was not in question, however,

⁵ Bose, 11. Tejaswini Ganti, *Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema*, Routledge Film Guidebooks (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 2. The name of Bombay was recently changed to Mumbai. Now that the link between Bombay and Bollywood has been established and clarified, I will hereafter refer to Bombay as Mumbai.

⁶ Ganti, 2.

⁷ Daniel Drache and Mark D. Froese, *The Global Cultural Commons after Cancun: Identity, Diversity and Citizenship* (Toronto: Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies, 2005), 27.

⁸ Ephraim Katz, *The Macmillan International Film Encyclopedia*, New ed. (London: Macmillan, 1994), 673; Manjunath Pendakur, *Indian Popular Cinema: Industry, Ideology and Consciousness* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc., 2003), 24; K. Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake, *Indian Popular Cinema: A Narrative of Cultural Change*, Revised and Updated ed. (Stoke on Trent, UK: Trentham Books, 2004), 129–140.

⁹ Kishore Valicha, *The Moving Image: A Study of Indian Cinema* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1988), 28; Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel, *Cinema India: The Visual Culture of Hindi Film* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 7.

¹⁰ Yves Thoraval, *The Cinemas of India: 1896-2000* (Delhi: Macmillan India, 2000).

was the notion that a movie of Jesus' life could be commercially viable. I suspect that the curiosity I encountered among Western acquaintances about what motivated Indian filmmakers to produce a movie about Jesus' life may have derived from perceptions of India as a predominantly Hindu nation. Therefore, to appreciate the context in which *Karunamayudu* was produced and the negotiations that marked its production, some background about the relationship between religion and Indian cinema is in order. That a movie of Jesus' life has been attributed with inspiring the Indian film industry points to the complexities of that relationship.

3. Religion and Indian Cinema

Potted histories of the Indian cinema industry often begin with one man's visit to the America-India Picture Palace in Bombay during the Christmas season of 1910.¹¹ Dhundiraj Govind Phalke (a.k.a. D.G. Phalke; 1870-1944), a Brahmin artist, photographer, painter and magician, sat mesmerized by a movie entitled *The Life of Christ*.¹² In the flickering light, Phalke claims he was 'gripped by a strange spell' as he began to visualize not Christ, but Krishna dancing across the silver screen, and in those moments, so the story goes, the dream of an Indian cinema was born.¹³ Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), reputedly the first indigenous feature film produced in India, was based on a story from the epic *Mahabharata*. When viewers caught a glimpse of their gods 'alive' on screen, many reportedly prostrated themselves in adulation.¹⁴ Later, with the release of *Shri Krishna Janam* (Birth of

¹¹ Interestingly, despite Phalke's own account of viewing the film during the Christmas season, P.K. Nair sets the event in Easter of 1911. P.K. Nair, 'In the Age of Silence: Beginnings of Cinema in India' <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/classics/rr0499/PUdrr6.htm> (accessed 12 October 2006).

¹² 'Swadeshi Moving Pictures', *Continuum* 2, no. 1 (1988-1989): 54. It is not certain which film by that title is being referred to here. There are at least two distinct possibilities: Gaumont's six-minute version (1899) or Pathé's five-minute one (1907). It should also be noted that this was not the first film of Jesus' life to be screened in India. An imported film of Jesus' life was showing at Bombay's Gaiety Theatre as early as 1901. Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, 2nd ed. (New York Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 9. Yves Thorval reports that a reel of *The Life of Christ* (date and source unknown) was circulating in South India as early as 1905. Thoraval, 15.

¹³ 'Swadeshi Moving Pictures', 54. It may not have been the first movie of Jesus' life he ever saw. Barnouw and Krishnaswamy report that a *Life of Jesus Christ* was showing in Bombay as early as 1901. Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, 9.

¹⁴ Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, 15.

Lord Krishna, 1918), Phalke achieved his goal of replacing Christ in film with India's gods. Phalke's movies, which drew heavily from Indian epics marked the birth of the mythological movies and a genre that was not only unique to Indian cinema but influenced subsequent developments in the industry, particularly films about religious figures. Phalke's encounter with, and response to, a Jesus film reinforces the claim that 'religion and cinema are inseparably linked in Indian culture'.¹⁵ It also goes some way toward explaining why it has been claimed that 'Hindu religious traditions and practices mark the content, structure and dominant moods of Indian films generally'.¹⁶ By virtue of its influence on the relationship between film and religion in India and other religious genres in the Indian industry, therefore, the mythological genre shaped the context in which *Karunamayudu* was produced. It also influenced its style.

On the one hand, as I will discuss further below, mythological films were caught up in political negotiations of Indianness that could have discouraged the making of a movie about Jesus in India. According to Indian film critic K.A. Abbas, mythologicals were 'a reaction against Missionary films about Jesus Christ' and were thus formative in 'making the masses immune from foreign cultural and religious influences'.¹⁷ A strong nationalist response to colonialism in the form of the mythological film may therefore explain why it took so long for locally produced movies of Jesus' life to emerge in India.

Yet it would be inaccurate to deduce from Abbas's claim about the widespread influence of mythological films that all Indian viewers were fond of them. One outraged reader wrote the following note to the movie magazine, *Roopavani* (apparently directed to fans of mythological films):

Do you really believe that they are blessing you by making all the gods and goddesses appear on screen? You should realise that the producers are using divinity at their will in order to make money. You should not forgive these producers who render our sacred tales

¹⁵ Gokulsing and Dissanayake, 55.

¹⁶ Ibid., 56.

¹⁷ K.A. Abbas, 'Cinema and National Integration', *Mainstream* 24, no. 28 (1985): 52-53, in Sushil Arora, *Cyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, vol. 2 (New Delhi: Anmol Publications, 2004), 394.

profane and exploit our deities to earn more wealth. You should banish all such films.¹⁸

Nor should one read the dearth of locally produced Jesus movies prior to the 1960s and 70s as a total rejection of Jesus in the Indian imagination. Indeed, following the release of *Karunamayudu* one critic noted how surprising it was that, given Indians' general esteem for Jesus, it had taken so long for his story to make its way on to India's cinema screens.¹⁹ Furthermore, English movies of Jesus' life and other biblical stories continued to circulate in India, suggesting that movies about Jesus were not entirely foreign to Indian cinema-goers.²⁰

The influence of mythologicals in Indian cinema, however enduring, should therefore not be overstated. Eventually they encountered competition from other genres and imported films and according to Indian cinema scholar Rachel Dwyer represent only one of three 'religious' genres in the industry. In addition to mythologicals, 'devotional' films have focused on the lives of saints and their pursuit of union with the divine.²¹ 'Islamicate' films have explored the challenges and issues facing primarily Muslim communities in India but they do not share significant parallels with filmed versions of the Hindu epics.²² Granted, the genre's renaissance in the overwhelmingly successful 1990s television 'religio-soaps' derived from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, demonstrated its enduring appeal for many Indians.²³ For the purposes of this project, it is perhaps most significant to note that although the mythological film was inspired by a movie of Jesus' life, it also shaped a

¹⁸ Rao Bhaskar, D., 'Attention Viewers! It Is Your Duty to Ban Mythological Films!', *Roopavani* (1948): 11-12.

¹⁹ Prabhu Gupta, 'Religion Has Shaped Indian Film', *Action*, January 1980, 20.

²⁰ Greta Palmer, 'Greatest Movie Success', *Christian Herald* (1944): 23, quoted in Terry Lindvall, *Sanctuary Cinema: Origins of the Christian Film Industry* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2007), 193.

²¹ Rachel Dwyer, *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), Chapters 1 and 2, respectively.

²² Ibid., 97. According to Dwyer, the term 'Islamicate' has been borrowed, via Mukul Kesavan, from Marshall Hodgson's *Venture of Islam* in which he used the term to describe the social and cultural—not necessarily religious—complex of Islamic cultures. Using this matrix, Dwyer suggests that the 'Islamicate' genre can include the 'Muslim social', as well as fantasy, courtesan, and historical films. Ibid., 8; 176. See Marshall Goodwin Simms Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974); Mukul Kesavan, 'Urdu, Awadh and the tawaif: the Islamicate roots of Hindi cinema', in Zoya Hasan, ed., *Forging Identities: Gender, Communities and the State* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1994): 244-257.

²³ Dwyer and Patel, 58.

context in which religious films were shaped largely by the themes, if not the characters, of Hindu epic narratives.

Mythological films are important to the history of *Karunamayudu* for yet another reason—their indirect influence on subsequent cinematic style. Unlike the mythologicals, *Karunamayudu* is not about deities from India's epics, such as *Mahabharata* or *Ramayana*. Indian film scholar T. Vishnu suggested to me in a discussion about *Karunamayudu* that it actually has much in common with the devotional genre, which tends to be more hagiographic.²⁴ Chander himself has insisted that *Karunamayudu* was meant to be a historical film.²⁵ In both genres, however, the presence and activities of deities have generally been represented using special effects such as beams of light or crude double-exposures. By refusing to use such conventions in his portrayal of Christ as a divine figure in *Karunamayudu*, Fr. Christopher Coelho was engaged indirectly with the genre, if only to reject it.²⁶

Furthermore, the significance of mythological films for our understanding of the production and reception of *Karunamayudu* is tied closely to their popular appeal in the South of India.²⁷ In that region, the genre has been linked inextricably with politics, since numerous actors who have played deities in mythological films have gone on to secure positions of political power.²⁸

4. Characteristics of Indian cinema

As just noted above, the complexity of Indian cinema's relationship to religion derives in part from the multiple traditions and genres that populate its history.

²⁴ I am indebted to Vishnu for encouraging me to consider that how people engaged such films is more significant than attempting to label them.

²⁵ Vijay Chander, Interview by the author, 16 November, 2006, Hyderabad, India.

²⁶ He conceded to me that one of these effects did slip into the production against his better judgement. In the nativity scene a beam of light moves from a star overhead to the manger where the baby Jesus lay. Fr. Christopher Coelho, Interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India.

²⁷ Thoraval.

²⁸ See Duncan Forrester, 'Factions and Filmstars: Tamil Nadu Politics since 1971', *Asian Survey* 16, no. 3 (1976).

Complicating the challenge of defining Indian cinema further is the observation made some time ago by film and culture critic Wimal Dissanayake, that as cinema became part of life in Asia, 'there was a constant tussle between the imported nature of the medium' and the determination to make it serve a variety of local 'values, beliefs and lifeways'.²⁹ I return to Phalke's development of the mythological genre as a case study of such a tussle and its implications for the characteristics of Indian cinema.

4.1 The interplay of local and global: D.G. Phalke – A case study

As noted above, one could read Phalke's decision to replace Jesus on screen as a political move. Like Indian film pioneers Sakaram Bhatvadekar and Hrilalal Sen before him, Phalke was an active participant in the *swadeshi* (indigenous goods) movement, a non-violent form of resistance to British colonization inspired by Mohatma Gandhi. *Swadeshi* can be understood on multiple levels, but its defining objective was to undercut foreign rule (with *swaraj* or home rule) by boycotting British products and encouraging local industries.³⁰ Phalke's vision, therefore, was not just to make films in India or to counter missionary films, as Abbas has suggested, but to build an entire industry that India could call its own.³¹ Indeed, Ashish Rajadhyaksha has argued convincingly that Phalke's move into the medium of cinema involved a conceptual and perceptual tension that problematizes a strictly political reading.³²

²⁹ Wimal Dissanayake, 'Cultural Identity and Asian Cinema: An Introduction', in *Cinema and Cultural Identity: Reflections on Films from Japan, India, and China*, ed. Wimal Dissanayake (Lanham: University Press of America, 1988), 1. He is also careful to emphasize that cultural identity is not necessarily the same as national identity, 2.

³⁰ C. F. Andrews, ed. *Mahatma Gandhi's Ideas: Including Selections from His Writings* (n.p.: Read Books, 2007), 119.

³¹ It is largely for this vision that Phalke is called 'the father of Indian cinema' an attribution he coined for himself. B.M. Malhotra, 'Dadasheb Phalke: The Father of Indian Cinema', *India Perspectives* March 2004 (2004): 20-24; 'D.G. Phalke; Dossier; Swadeshi Moving Pictures', *Continuum* 2, no. 1 (1988-89). 59-63.

³² The following paragraphs represent my summary of Rajadhyaksha's essay. I take responsibility for any misinterpretations. Ashish Rajadhyaksha, 'The Phalke Era: Conflict of Traditional Form and Modern Technology', *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 14-15 (1987).

Instead, Phalke's shift to the new medium may be read as a negotiation of aesthetics, politics, and religion, tangled up in tensions between tradition and modernity. Phalke's artistic education was broad and included training in the 'principles of British academic art, naturalist landscape painting and portraiture', as well as experience with photography and various techniques of printing and photolithography.³³ He had also been a student of the famous Indian painter Raja Ravi Varma, from whom he had also learned to mass-produce images of Hindu gods and goddesses.³⁴ Later Phalke set up his own printing company that quickly became one of the best-known in the country. He resigned from it in 1909, however, after a falling out with his partner.³⁵ Discouraged, and at a loss to know where he might next direct his entrepreneurial and creative skills, he attended a screening of *The Life of Christ*. His encounter with Jesus onscreen in the theatre prompted him to ask, 'Could we, the sons of India, ever be able to see Indian images on the screen?'³⁶

In addition to being a political question, Phalke's vision cannot be abstracted from the religious milieu that had shaped his artistic and economic vision. *La Vie du Jesus Christ* offered him a way out of his creative and economic doldrums, uniting in one stroke his *swadeshi* values and his passion for the representation of 'Indian images', portraits of the gods and goddesses. If the cinematic medium promised to unite his passions for politics and art, however, the vision that danced before Phalke's mind's eye was also conflicted.³⁷ Cinema was an imported technology. Furthermore, it reduced even further role of the painter of mythological images, whose skills had already been relegated to the service of mass production. Phalke was caught between his desire to innovate and the purity of Mohatma Gandhi's understanding of *swadeshi*:

An industry, to be Indian, must be demonstrably in the interest of the masses. It must be manned by Indians, both skilled unskilled. Its

³³ Ibid.: 47. An interesting comparison has yet to be teased out between Phalke's fascination with film and his methods of distribution and that of John Gilman, the North American evangelical responsible for purchasing and distributing *Karunamayudu*.

³⁴ Varma's contribution to the development of calendar art is well documented. Christopher Pinney, *'Photos of the Gods': The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 60-71.

³⁵ This brief overview was drawn from Rajadhyaksha: 47-48.

³⁶ 'Swadeshi Moving Pictures', 54.

³⁷ Rajadhyaksha: 65.

capital and machinery should be Indian, and the labour employed should have a living wage and be comfortably housed.³⁸

Cinematic technology, as an imported technology did not qualify. Therefore, Phalke resolved the problem in two ways. First, he claimed that his vision for an Indian cinema industry was *swadeshi* 'in the sense that the capital, ownership, employees and stories are *swadeshi*'.³⁹ Second, he found a way to transfer the religious agency of two-dimensional religious images to the cinematic context. In attempting to hold together the 'perceptive opposition between 'Indian images' and 'industrial technology', Phalke recreated even as he elicited, an 'Indian gaze'.⁴⁰

This 'Indian gaze', according to Rajadhyaksha, was represented in Phalke's mythologicals by an emphasis on frontality and sustained shots of the gods and goddesses. Frontal poses were common in two-dimensional god posters and long takes invited meditation, making it possible for viewers to have *darshan* with their gods.⁴¹ *Darshan* is a form of visual engagement in Hindu thought that I will only briefly introduce here. Indologist Diana Eck, often cited for her discussion of the significance of *darshan* in the rituals of Hindu worship, indicates that seeing is integral to the worship of deities. When worshippers go to the temple, they go to 'see' the deity, but also to gain the blessing of the divine by being seen by the deity.⁴² In addition to seeing, however, *darshan* is also about being in the presence of a divinity and 'the order instituted and supported by that divinity'.⁴³

³⁸ A quotation from Gandhi in Ibid.

³⁹ As quoted in Ibid.: 64.

⁴⁰ Ibid.: 66. Further discussions of this gaze as it relates to the visual culture of India, will be temporarily suspended. For further discussions along these lines, see Pinney; Dwyer and Patel, *Cinema India: The Visual Culture of Hindi Film*, 43-47. Phalke was not the first to dabble in the representation of gods and goddesses using the media of moving images. Mahadev Gopal Patwardhan is credited with producing magic lantern slide sequences of the *Ramayana* and attempted to make his characters appear to move. Dinesh Raheja and Jitendra Kothari, *Indian Cinema, the Bollywood Saga* (New Delhi: Lustre Press: Roli Books, 2004), 16.

⁴¹ This concludes my summary of Rajadhyaksha's argument. For more on god-posters, see H. Daniel Smith, 'The Effects Of 'God Posters' On Hindus and Their Devotional Traditions', in *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia*, ed. Lawrence A. Babb and Susan Snow Wadley (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995).

⁴² Diana L. Eck, *Darsān: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 2nd rev. and enl. ed. (Chambersburg, PA: Anima Books, 1985), 3.

⁴³ M. Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction* (New Delhi: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 75.

Rajadhyaksha's thesis about Phalke's negotiation of politics and religion in the development of the mythological emphasizes that although Indian cinema scholarship has typically approached Indian film as a 'contemporary political document', it was imbued with religious significance from the beginning. This observation reinforces the claim made earlier that Indian cinema, as well as its characteristic conventions, was born out of a strong Hindu sensibility informed by Phalke's Brahmin heritage. 'Indian images', in his view, therefore represented the gods and goddesses of Hindu mythology. They did not include Jesus, Buddha or Mohammed, despite the long-standing history of those traditions on the subcontinent.

Rajadhyaksha's argument also brings to the fore the visual dynamic of *darshan*, reminding us that the cinema-house could function much like a shrine or temple and that film was perceived by some to be more than just an image of a deity. To what degree mythologicals are still perceived to function in that way is a subject for future interrogation. As I will argue in my analysis of *Karunamayudu* and its reception, however, there are elements of the film that could have encouraged viewers to take *darshan* with Jesus.

Perhaps most significantly, the details of Phalke's negotiation between aesthetics, politics and religion highlight that 'from the start Indian cinema has dramatically displayed the interplay of the global and the local within its discourses'.⁴⁴ In other words, a defining characteristic of Indian cinema is its negotiation of Western and Indian narrative, dramatic, musical and cinematic forms. The more one appreciates this aspect of the industry, the more accessible the nuances of *Karunamayudu* become, and the easier it is to understand the tensions between Coelho's and Chander's perspectives on Indian cinema.

4.2 Hybridity

In his detailed and informative essay, 'Is There an Indian Way of Filmmaking?' Philip Lutgendorf reviewed a number of ways in which the 'distinctiveness' of Indian cinema has been perceived. Cultural-historical critics have tended to highlight continuities between the conventions of Indian cinema and long standing performing

⁴⁴ Gokulsing and Dissanayake, 2.

traditions, especially those concerned with representing the Indian epics, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. Others have emphasized the technological features of Indian cinema, especially the camerawork that is characterized by frontality, as discussed above, and a lack of inhibition about making the apparatus of cinema visible.⁴⁵ Psychological / mythic approaches have been used to examine Indian films as 'contemporary myths' designed to help viewers manage the stresses of daily life.⁴⁶ Political-economic critics, by contrast, have tended to employ Marxist social theories to argue that Indian films 'encode' and 'subsume' modern social ideals in narratives that on the surface enforce traditional hierarchies.⁴⁷

By no means do these models exhaust the range of analytical approaches applied to the study of Indian cinema, nor will I discuss them further. Rather, with Lutgendorf, I emphasize that although 'every cinema borrows', the 'hybridity' of Indian cinema, especially its 'visual and musical hybridity', is what distinguishes it as Indian.⁴⁸ As Indian film and culture critic Ashis Nandy has said of Indian cinema: 'It is a different game with its own ground rules and ideological principles'.⁴⁹ An oft-repeated lyric from the movie *Awaara* (1951), which can mean gypsy-rogue, wanderer, or rootless one, may illustrate best the hybridity of Indian culture and film:

The shoes I'm wearing are made in Japan
My trousers fashioned in England
The red cap on my head is Russian
In spite of it all my heart is Indian.⁵⁰

Hybridity in the Indian cinematic tradition can be observed in a number of areas. Perhaps most obvious is the habit of Indian filmmakers to freely adapt Hollywood

⁴⁵ Philip Lutgendorf, 'Is There an Indian Way of Filmmaking?', *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 10, no. 3 (2006): 227-256.

⁴⁶ Sudhir Khakar, 'The Cinema as Collective Fantasy', in *Indian Cinema Superbazaar*, ed. Aruna Vasudev and P. Lenglet (New Delhi: Vikas, 1983), 97, in Lutgendorf, 229.

⁴⁷ Lutgendorf.

⁴⁸ Ibid. All films, including Jesus films, are ostensibly hybrids. In the next chapter I will argue that what sets *Karunamayudu* apart as an Indian Jesus film is the set of resources it combines to portray Jesus.

⁴⁹ Ashis Nandy, 'Notes Towards an Agenda for the Next Generation of Film Theorists in India', *South Asian Popular Culture* 1, no. 1 (2003): 79.

⁵⁰ Quoted from Farrukh Dhondy, 'Keeping Faith: Indian Film and Its World', *Daedalus: Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 114, no. (1985), 130.

plots and conventions to their own ends.⁵¹ As the title of an article in *Filmfare* put it: 'We've Always Borrowed From Abroad'.⁵² Tejaswini Ganti's ethnographic studies among Hindi filmmakers sheds some light on how they themselves have perceived those differences and what is entailed in the Indianisation of film. Javed Akhtar, who co-wrote the blockbusters *Sholay* (1975) and *Deewar* (1975), told Ganti that he compares Western films to short stories and Indian films to novels.⁵³ Likewise, Sutanu Gupta argued that Indian viewers demand more narrative complexity; they want to see every part of life represented without the story being at the same time a 'hodge-podge'.⁵⁴

In their Indianising, however, filmmakers have invoked a number of long standing narrative, dramatic and musical traditions. Wimal Dissanayake and Malti Sahai have noted that in contrast to most Hollywood films, 'the mainline Indian cinema presents us with a different order of diegesis that can best be comprehended in terms of the narrative discontinuities found in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*'.⁵⁵ Their observation is in keeping with Philip Lutgendorf's overview of the influences and adaptations of long standing classical dramatic and musical traditions on Indian cinema. His work not only demonstrates the linkage between those traditions and religious texts, but also reminds us that those traditions were closely associated with long-standing oral storytelling techniques. Narrative structure in Indian cinema has reflected those conventions especially through the use of flashbacks, humourous diversions, and so on.⁵⁶

Another filmmaker Anjum Ranjabali has argued that the development of relationships and provocation of emotions are key factors in the Indianising of Western sources.⁵⁷ Unsurprisingly, then, Manjunath Pendakur claims that music is

⁵¹ Panna Shah, *The Indian Film* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 44, 89, 96.; Dwyer and Patel, *Cinema India: The Visual Culture of Hindi Film*, 15.

⁵² Veritas, 'We've Always Borrowed from Abroad', *Filmfare*, Dec 23-Jan 15 (1978).

⁵³ Ganti, 173.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁵⁵ Wimal Dissanayake and Malti Sahai, *Sholay, a Cultural Reading* (New Delhi: Wiley Eastern, 1992), 11.

⁵⁶ Lutgendorf, 242.

⁵⁷ Ganti, 77, 182-183. See also Corey Creekmur, 'Popular Hindi Cinema and the Film Song', in *Traditions in World Cinema*, ed. Linda Badley, R. Barton Palmer, and Steven Jay Schneider (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006). This observation goes some way toward understanding not only the lack of emotional inhibition demonstrated by a number of Jesus' disciples

arguably 'the heart and soul of Indian film'.⁵⁸ It, too, is a hybrid of external influences and indigenous trends. Film music is so important to the success of most Indian movies that few stars are trusted to sing the songs they perform on screen.⁵⁹ Well-known playback singers (the ones whose voices are dubbed over the soundtrack) are invested with a star power of their own, to the degree that a movie's success may occasionally rest more with the vocalist than the star or the plot.⁶⁰ Indeed, Corey Creekmur has argued provocatively that in order to best appreciate Indian cinema one might need to recognise it 'as the presentation of songs which are occasionally "interrupted" by a narrative'.⁶¹

Although to some degree hybridity characterizes all filmmaking, it is nevertheless arguable that Indian cinema is marked by a unique and long-standing trans-national fusion of cinematic conventions that crosses religious and cultural boundaries. In the words of Indian cinema scholar Rachel Dwyer, 'much of Indian cinema is . . . the product of a new public culture that arose during the nineteenth century, the hybridity of which is inherent to its very nature, as it brings together traditional Indian images with industrial technology'.⁶² There is, however, an inherent danger in describing Indian film primarily as a hybrid. As Madhava Prasad has argued, attempts to essentialize Indian cinema rob it of historicity or the possibility of change.⁶³ Such a caricature can also distract attention from the regional nuances that have marked Indian cinema. Telugu cinema is a case in point.

Film historian Yves Thorval has simultaneously referred to Telugu cinema as 'one of the most important cinematographies in India' and 'one of the most mediocre'.⁶⁴ In his view the region has shown 'a marked preference for

in *Karunamayudu*, but the number of men in India who told me that they cried openly whenever they watched Jesus' passion sequence in the film.

⁵⁸ Pendakur, 119.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 138-139; 124-126.

⁶⁰ Ibid., Ch. 5.

⁶¹ Creekmur, 201.

⁶² Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel, *Cinema India: The Visual Culture of Hindi Film* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), n. 6; 13.

⁶³ M. Madhava Prasad, 'This Thing Called Bollywood'. www.india-seminar.com/2003/525/525%20madhava%20prasad.htm (accessed 20 June 2005).

⁶⁴ Thoraval, 344, 345.

mythologicals' and then melodramas and social films.⁶⁵ This caricature of South Indian cinema is oft-repeated. Yet Sai Prasad Alahari's survey of Telugu cinema into the 21st century is more nuanced and traces a progression from early fascination with mythologicals, to the advent of social films in the 1930s. The latter tackled issues including alcoholism, untouchability and anti-brahminism.⁶⁶ An emphasis on social issues continued until the 1970s when investment patterns changed and buyers replaced distributors as the major source of financing. Consequently, a shift toward more commercialized film began in the 1970s as Telugu films became 'hero oriented', and began to mimic trends in Hindi cinema.⁶⁷

This brief sketch of Indian cinema demonstrates that the industry is a more complex and regionally diverse phenomenon than is often implied by the title Bollywood. It also provides a vignette of the intersecting trends, themes and issues that would have informed Chander's and Coelho's perceptions of Indian cinema. It would be disingenuous, however, to emphasize the industry's various inflections without also highlighting its role as an 'integrating force' in India.⁶⁸

4.3 A site of Integration

One of the notable aspects of Indian cinema from its earliest days has been its role in the deconstruction of caste barriers. Brahmins and Dalits alike can sit beside each other in the dark, even if they would never speak on the street or touch each other.⁶⁹ According to Hameedudin Mehmood and K. M. Sumutkar cinema personnel may 'profess every kind of religion. But in the pursuit of their common goal, that of working for and making films, they join hands and work as a team'.⁷⁰ Shahu Modak, who is known for being a Christian, has nevertheless played Lord Krishna to acclaim

⁶⁵ Ibid., 347.

⁶⁶ Sai Prasad Alahari, 'From Resistance to Indifference? Seven Decades of Popular Telugu Cinema', *Deep Focus* (2005): 26.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Hameedudin Mehmood and K.M. Sumutkar, *Screen* (1985), in Sushil Arora, *Cyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, vol. 2 (New Delhi: Anmol Publications, 2004), 387.

⁶⁹ S. Theodore Baskaran, 'Encountering a New Art,' in *Tamil Cinema: The Cultural Politics of India's Other Film Industry*, ed. Selvaraj Velayutham (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 112.

⁷⁰ Mehmood and Sumutkar, quoted in Arora, 387.

in a number of widely circulated films.⁷¹ Purportedly a Muslim theatre owner once deliberately screened a Hindu mythological during a festival season.⁷² On another occasion Mehmood and Sumutkar report that a group of Muslims burnt down a theatre in Lahore because a character in the film they were watching threw a Bible on the ground.⁷³ Film critic K.A. Abbas has asserted that after watching actors play characters from religious backgrounds other than their own, one is

prepared to believe in an idyllic India, in which Hindus and Muslims, Brahmins and Harijans, can and do live together in an atmosphere of amity and goodwill . . . You forget the riots and concentrate on the goodness and the compassion of the screen characters.⁷⁴

Granted, not all movies generate such generosity, nor are inter-religious relations consistently peaceable. The more recent *Parzania* (2005) recounted the communal violence that erupted in the Gujarati riots of 2002, resulting in the death of thousands. Nevertheless, the long history of collaboration between actors, producers and directors from a variety of cultural and religious traditions suggests that the combination of religious traditions represented in the production team of *Karunamayudu* was not particularly unique to Indian cinema.

As diverse and nuanced as India's film industry can be, then, it is simultaneously diverse and integrative, a context where religious and cultural boundaries often blur in the interest of making films. Furthermore, although myriad influences have intersected in the history of the industry, they have 'never congealed' as classical Hollywood film did.⁷⁵ Consequently, one can appreciate that Vijay Chander and Fr. Christopher Coelho may have held differing opinions about the nature and value of Indian cinema. Before turning to consider their views, however, I review briefly the more immediate cultural context in which *Karunamayudu* was produced.

⁷¹ Ibid; Arora, 389.

⁷² Mehmood and Sumutkar, 12, quoted in Arora, 388.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ K.A. Abbas, 'n.t.', *Mainstream*, vol 24, no. 28, (March 15, 1986), 20-21, quoted in Arora, 391.

⁷⁵ Wimal Dissanayake, 'Rethinking Indian Popular Cinema: Towards Newer Frames of Understanding', in *Rethinking Third Cinema*, ed. Wimal Dissanayake and Anthony R. Guneratne (New York: Routledge, 2003), 210.

5. Cultural Context⁷⁶

India was not a peaceful place during the 1970s when *Karunamayudu* was in production. Nearly thirty years had passed since the nation had gained independence from Britain (1947) and yet it was embroiled in some of its greatest turmoil ever. Conflicts on India's northern (western) borders with Pakistan were still fresh in the national memory, as was the establishment of an independent Bangladesh (1971). India's capacity for democratic self-governance was also challenged on a number of fronts. Then on 26 June 1975, for a complex set of reasons, including political unrest and charges of electoral malpractice that would have limited her power, prime-minister Indira Gandhi encouraged President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed to declare an internal state of emergency.⁷⁷ 'The Emergency' as that period is often referred to, lasted nearly two years. Although some of her initiatives brought a measure of stability to the nation, others, such as a draconian approach to family planning influenced by her son Sanjay, remain a point of controversy in her political legacy.⁷⁸ The level of uncertainty that marked the period during which *Karunamayudu* was produced is reflected in a critic's observation that both Gandhi and her opponents 'betrayed their lack of faith in the rule of law'.⁷⁹

Threatening national stability on another front were uprisings like the Naxalite and Telangana movements. The Naxalite movement was born out of internal conflict within the Communist party in the late 1960s, and according to its long-time catalyst, Charu Mazumdar, intended to make the '70s 'the decade of liberation'.⁸⁰ The Naxalite name derives from a group of villages in Bengal called Naxalbari. On 22 May 1967, party members clashed with police on behalf of a villager whose landlord ostensibly sought to forcibly evict him against court orders. The region was declared a 'liberated zone' by the rebels, and police and government

⁷⁶ Most of this section is taken from Dwight Friesen, 'Showing Compassion and Suggesting Peace in *Karunamayudu* an Indian Jesus Film', *Studies in World Christianity* 14, no. 2 (2007).

⁷⁷ P. N. Dhar, *Indira Gandhi, the 'Emergency' and Indian Democracy* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 256-259, 262; Richard L. Park, 'Political Crisis in India, 1975', *Asian Survey* 15, no. 11 (1975), 996.

⁷⁸ Dhar, 258-62, 323-24.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁸⁰ Rabindra Ray, *The Naxalites and Their Ideology* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 82.

troops were barred entry.⁸¹ Although it began in Bengal the movement quickly multiplied in the form of extremist groups throughout the nation.⁸²

For two decades prior, the Telangana movement, with 'no parallel in Indian history since the 1857 war of independence', had marked daily life in Andhra Pradesh (AP) where *Karunamayudu* was first released.⁸³ It was a populist revolt that sought to establish a 'people's state' (*praja rajyam*), free from the oppression of *doras*, or landlords, who served the interests of the Muslim Nizam.⁸⁴ This 'anti-landlord and anti-Nizam struggle', which began around 1938 and officially came to an end in 1951, was largely coordinated by the Communist party, especially in the final decade.⁸⁵ The Naxalite movement officially came to an end in 1972.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, it maintained a sufficient presence in Andhra Pradesh during the 1970s that the government of AP equipped community leaders and young people with firearms for use in resisting the guerrilla warfare of Naxalite groups. Again, the law was being circumvented.⁸⁷

Adding to tensions in the South was the growing strength of regional politics, especially in the form of the Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu, broadly identified with resistance to the hierarchical control of Brahmins, the caste system, suppression of women and the domination of Hindi as the national language.⁸⁸ One offshoot of the movement, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam party (DMK), formed in 1949, tended to present itself as loving and serving the poor as well as helping to deliver the oppressed.⁸⁹ The DMK in particular utilized the cinema to spread its rhetoric one of the better-known examples of which is the popular Tamil film *Parasakthi*

⁸¹ Biplab Dasgupta, *The Naxalite Movement* (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1974), 3-8.

⁸² Ray, 52.

⁸³ Dasgupta, 18.

⁸⁴ Inukonda Thirumali, *Against Dora and Nizam: People's Movement in Telangana, 1939-1948* (New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers, Distributors, 2003), 1-2, 18.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 3; Puchalapalli Sundarayya, *Telangana People's Armed Struggle, 1946-51* (New Delhi: NBC, 1985), 120.

⁸⁶ Dasgupta, 26.

⁸⁷ Fareeduddin Kazmi, 'How Angry Is the Angry Young Man? 'Rebellion' in the Conventional Hindi Films', in *The Secret Politics of Our Desires*, ed. Ashis Nandy (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 153.

⁸⁸ Robert L. Hardgrave, *The Dravidian Movement* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1965), 10, 26, 35, 43.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 35; Forrester, 288.

(1952).⁹⁰ It documents the injustices suffered by a Tamil family, and particularly its protagonist, Kalyani, in a society where all the structures, legal and religious, are corrupted. Although the Dravidian movement had been a social force before India's independence in 1947 it emerged with vigour in electoral politics during the 1970s.⁹¹

Indian cinema scholars have also noted a sea change in the industry that occurred simultaneous with these upheavals in the 1970s. The emergence of the 'angry young man', often portrayed by superstar Amitabh Bachchan has been described by Indian film critic Vijay Mishra as 'one of the most significant shifts in the construction of the star hero in Bombay'.⁹² Another Indian film scholar, Madhava Prasad, has noted a parallel between Bachchan's rise and the political upheaval of the 1970s in that a lack of faith in the law and government left many with only one apparent option, and that was to act outside the governing institutions. In this environment Bachchan became a hero for representing the 'dominated' and marginalized in Indian cinema'.⁹³

Movies like *Sholay* (1975) and *Deewaar* (1975) are prime examples of Bachchan in this role. In the first, a 'curry-western', he plays the part of Jai, a hired gun. Together with his friend Veeru (Dharmendra), they seek revenge on Gabbar Singh for killing the family of Thakur, a former chief of police. Significantly, vengeance is executed outwith the bounds of the law; Vijay and Veeru have been released from prison as a political favour to a retired officer. In *Deewaar*, Bachchan is one of two brothers who suffer poverty and humiliation as a consequence of their father having abandoned them as children. Branded with a tattoo reading 'your father is a thief', Vijay (Bachchan) grows up bitter and eventually turns to a life of crime. His brother, on the other hand, becomes a police officer, and the narrative predictably leads to a clash between the two. In both cases, Bachchan was the more charismatic hero who stood up to the 'system'.

Furthermore, as noted earlier, the 1970s were also a period during which the close relationship between the film industry and regional politics in the South

⁹⁰ Hardgrave. 75.

⁹¹ M.S.S. Pandian, 'Parasakthi: *Life and Times of a DMK Film*', in *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*, ed. Ravi S. Vasudevan (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 89.

⁹² Dwyer and Patel, *Cinema India: The Visual Culture of Hindi Film*, 34; Mishra, 12.

⁹³ Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*, 138.

became especially pronounced. The pattern of film stars riding their on-screen popularity to positions of power in government in South India is well documented—the most notable examples being N.T. Ramarao (NTR) in Andhra Pradesh and M.G. Ramachandran (MGR) in Tamil Nadu. Both played the roles of deities in mythological movies before achieving significant posts in government.⁹⁴ There are reports that in 1969, MGR announced plans to make a film about Christ, but I have not been able to confirm that it was ever completed.⁹⁵ It was in this turbulent time that *Karunamayudu* was produced.

Having sketched from various angles the cinematic context in which Coelho and Vijay Chander conceived and produced *Karunamayudu*, I turn in closing to consider how their perspectives on Indian cinema informed the film's production. My findings were based on a combination of their published comments and transcripts, as well as notes from my own conversations with each of them. What emerged was a difference of opinion between the two about the merits of Indian cinema that appears to have been as informed by political perspectives as it was by religious or theological agendas.

6. The significance of *Karunamayudu* as an Indian film

In the preceding pages I sketched in broad strokes the diversity, integrative potential, and multiple negotiations that have marked Indian cinema. As I noted earlier, the Indian film industry has been associated with two general approaches to filmmaking; following D.G. Phalke's example, many filmmakers have drawn on India's narrative and dramatic traditions in constructing their films. By contrast, Satyajit Ray espoused a vision for the industry that located its Indianness in the portrayal of daily life in India itself and drew from Western neorealism rather than classical Hollywood fare or *masala* films. I have reiterated this distinction in order to suggest that it highlights, respectively, Vijay Chander's and Christopher Coelho's expectations for

⁹⁴ See Forrester; Vaasanthi, *Cut-Outs, Caste and Cine Stars* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2006).

⁹⁵ Robert L. Hardgrave, *Essays in the Political Sociology of South India* (New Delhi: Usha, 1979), 105.

Karunamayudu as an Indian film. With this distinction in mind, I return to the question of how Coelho and Chander perceived Indian cinema as a potential site for representing Jesus.⁹⁶

6.1. The significance of Indian cinema for Fr. Christopher Coelho

Fr. Christopher Coelho appears to have had the most in common with Satyajit Ray's preference for cinematic realism.⁹⁷ Coelho's tastes may also have been influenced by an education heavily informed by Western theology, philosophy and media practice. Alternatively, Coelho's approach to cinema may have had something to do with where he was raised. As one film columnist observed anecdotally, Keralite cinephiles have tended to be 'more literate' and 'more articulate and critical' than viewers from other states.⁹⁸

Coelho's apprehensions about the capacity of Indian filmmakers to deal 'competently with the life of Christ' were reflected in a review of *Karunamayudu* that he published within a couple of years of its release.⁹⁹ Given Coelho's concerns, the title of his essay, 'How *Hindus* filmed the life of Christ', suggests that he wanted to deflect responsibility for the project to local filmmakers.¹⁰⁰ Granted, his choice of words could have had a different motivation. Since the essay was written after the film was completed and had generated positive results at the box office, he may have been trying to give credit where it was due. The title may also have reflected an attempt to downplay the Church's role in the production, either because

⁹⁶ Although Modukuri Johnson also played a key role in the film, I have been able to acquire little information about him and his role in the film save that he was a Telugu cinema veteran and Coelho's claim that he was a Protestant. The bulk of the following sections therefore focus primarily on Coelho and Chander.

⁹⁷ It is commonly acknowledged that the style of cinema that has dominated Indian cinema does not conform to the kind of realism that has characterized Western cinema. For a discussion, see Raminder Kaur and Ajay J. Sinha, 'Bollyworld: An Introduction,' in *Bollyworld: Popular Indian Cinema through a Transnational Lens*, ed. Raminder Kaur and Ajay J. Sinha (New Delhi; Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2005).

⁹⁸ Mangala Chandran, 'Afternoon Pictures', *n.p.* (newsclipping held by author), 62. Das Gupta makes a similar claim, that in contrast to the people of Andhra Pradesh, Keralites refused to allow actors who played gods to move into positions of political power. Das Gupta, *The Painted Face: Studies in India's Popular Cinema*, 41.

⁹⁹ Christopher Coelho, 'How Hindus Filmed the Life of Christ', *Action*, January 1980, 16.

¹⁰⁰ Emphasis mine.

Amruthavani's influence waned in the final stage of production, or to avoid charges of proselytization. Regardless of his motivations, by attributing the film to local filmmakers Coelho distanced himself from a movie that did not represent his cinematic ideals.¹⁰¹

Yet Coelho's article also indicates that his apprehensions about Indian filmmakers reflected a rather cynical perception of Indian society, generally. As he put it, 'One basic factor to be considered when looking at Indian film, as I see it, is what I would call a bypass in the process of civilization'.¹⁰² From his perspective, while 'Western man' was developing logic and method from the time of Gutenberg onward, the influence of the illiterate village population on India as a whole was such that the 'fundamental thought pattern' of India was 'still through images, sounds, myths rhythms and gestures'.¹⁰³ Thus, when visual media technologies arrived in village India, they were treated as toys 'to be played with' rather than as an adult's 'sophisticated versions' of his childhood toys.¹⁰⁴ Coelho seemed to imply that although India's dramatic traditions were quite sophisticated in their own right, they still tended to rely on stereotypical characters, and functioned primarily to reinforce codes of morality. As Indian film scholar Chidananda das Gupta noted about popular Indian films in the South:

The acting derives its hamming from the forms bred in the all-night, open-air rural traditional theatres and puts them into the intimacy of the cinema screen. The older rural forms required loud voices that could be heard and exaggerated gestures that could be seen from a distance. There is no question in the cinema that follows them of the inner logic of a character's motivations and development.¹⁰⁵

Furthermore, older dramatic forms required active participation from audience members. With the arrival of cinema, the heavy make-up and the grand gestures

¹⁰¹ It is worth keeping in mind that Coelho's decision to participate in the film not only involved a compromise of his ideals but submission to his superiors.

¹⁰² Coelho, 'How Hindus Filmed the Life of Christ', 16.

¹⁰³ Ibid. Note the privileging of text over image in his thinking.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Chidananda Das Gupta, 'The Painted Face of Politics', in *Cinema and Cultural Identity*, ed. Wimal Dissanayake (Lanham: University Press of America, 1988),

required for stage acting were simply transferred to the new medium, without taking into account the different relationship to viewers achievable by the power of the camera and the size of the screen.¹⁰⁶

A number of observations follow that inform our understanding of Coelho's attitude toward *Karunamayudu*. His lack of respect for Indian film appears confined either to the ubiquitous Hindi *masala* films or the mythologicals purportedly popular in the South of India. Since he did not distinguish a single genre as 'Indian', however, it is difficult to know whether he appreciated any Indian films at all. By associating a preference for visual modes of communication with illiteracy and backwardness, Coelho demonstrated a preference for the linear logic of literacy. Yet he cannot be accused of disdain for things visual and creative. His own artistic sensibilities can be seen in his appreciation for the verse of Rabindranath Tagore, as well as his practice of writing songs, writing, drawing, sculpting, and publishing.¹⁰⁷ It is more likely that his suggestion that Indian villagers—and filmmakers—engaged with cinematic technology as with a toy reflects an insight similar to Satyajit Ray's claim that some knowledge of Western culture is necessary to understand the grammar of filmmaking.¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, it is impossible to avoid a tinge of condescension in his assertion that local directors generally lacked 'the kind of artistry and realism that the telling of a story like that of Christ would call for'.¹⁰⁹ Given the long-standing influence of the epic, dance, and dramatic traditions of India, it is not surprising that Indian viewers seem to have favoured a cinematic style reminiscent of those traditions.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ See Chidananda Das Gupta, *The Painted Face: Studies in India's Popular Cinema* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 1991), 20.

¹⁰⁷ Christopher Coelho, *New Kind of Fool: Meditations on St Francis* (Secunderabad: Amruthavani, 1986); Christopher Coelho, *And Now I Can See!* (Secunderabad: JeevanPrint, 2002).

¹⁰⁸ I take issue with that conclusion, but it does point to the inter-relationship between Western cultures and others. Ray's comments summarized from Mira Reym Binford, 'Innovation and Imitation in the Contemporary Indian Cinema', in *Cinema and Cultural Identity: Reflections on Films from Japan, India and China*, ed. Wimal Dissanayake (Lanham: University Press of America, 1988), 104.

¹⁰⁹ Coelho, 'How Hindus Filmed the Life of Christ', 17. It is a claim similar to those levelled against Jesus films in North America by the likes of Paul Schrader, James Wall or Neil Hurley. Neil P. Hurley, 'Christ-Transfigurations in Film: Notes on a Meta-Genre', *Journal of Popular Culture* 13, no. 3 (1980), 61; Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972), 4; James M. Wall, 'Biblical Spectaculars and Secular Man', in *Celluloid and Symbols*, ed. John Charles Cooper and Carl Skrade (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 52, 60.

¹¹⁰ This reference to the masses also implies that he was not one of them and reflects an understanding of media now commonly associated with the Frankfurt School and the writings of Theodor Adorno.

Without knowing precisely who influenced his thinking with regard to film and theology, it is difficult to know whether his pessimism about Indian cinema was established before he studied media production in London or was otherwise influenced by his Roman Catholic upbringing and higher education. Like some of his Roman Catholic counterparts in the West, Coelho seems to have assumed that films, like other arts, could be evaluated on a continuum between high art and low art, and that the religious potential of film can only be realized through high art.¹¹¹ Furthermore, his account of the film's production suggests that one of his primary objectives for being involved with *Karunamayudu* was to redeem the representation of Jesus from the vagaries of South Indian cinema, and perhaps set a new standard for the industry.¹¹² Fr. Ambroise, who was also on staff at Amruthavani at the time claims that Coelho 'wanted the film to be very artistic, something similar to . . . Zeffirelli's film'.¹¹³ Given the circumstances of the film's production, however, that objective was never achieved. When I last spoke with Coelho he asked me to note that the final print of the film represented significant adaptations to his screenplay and scripts. The final result, in his view, was 'mediocre'.¹¹⁴

That said, he did concede that the film represented the story of Jesus to his 'own people' in way that Western films, despite their sophistication, could not. He also acknowledged that his involvement with *Karunamayudu* had been efficacious in its own right. Not long after the film was released, Coelho attended a retreat in France where he was invited to reflect on and evaluate the significance of his latest artistic project. One night he had a dream in which he was on a movie set, seated between the director and the crane on which the cameraman was positioned. In the dream he experienced the sensation of mud, sand, and dirt falling on his head, and he realized that this scene was not only part of the movie but that the camera was trained on him. Coelho interpreted the falling earth to represent the disappointments that had plagued *Karunamayudu's* production history and he concluded, from a spiritual perspective, that the frustrations and challenges of making the movie had contributed to the movie's success as well as his personal formation.

¹¹¹ Peter P. Schillaci, *Movies and Morals* (Notre Dame, IN: Fides Publishers, 1968), 23, 30.

¹¹² Coelho, 'How Hindus Filmed the Life of Christ', 17.

¹¹³ Raymond Ambroise, Personal email to the author, 20 February 2008.

¹¹⁴ Christopher Coelho, Interview with author, 16 November 2006; Coelho, 'How Hindus Filmed the Life of Christ', 19.

This review of Coelho's attitude toward Indian cinema does not indicate precisely which theological or religious traditions informed his approach to *Karunamayudu*'s production. What it does provide, however, is a partial glimpse of the matrix of influences and factors that Coelho negotiated in his involvement with, and assessment of the film. In so doing, it complicates attempts to establish a causal relationship between a single theological or religious tradition and the content or style of *Karunamayudu*. Put differently, it reinforces media scholar Janet Harbord's observation that a 'taste for film cultures involves our imaginary identifications, our familiarity with certain institutions and cultural spaces.'¹¹⁵ In other words, it demonstrates that our approaches to film are shaped largely by 'our own individual histories'.¹¹⁶ As I demonstrate in the next section, the context in which Vijay Chander was raised was considerably different from Coelho's.

6.2 The significance of Indian cinema for Vijay Chander

Chander's relationship to *Karunamayudu* changed radically over the course of its production. He admits that the opportunity to play Jesus was at first a chance to make a name for himself in the Telugu film industry; he had been immersed in the dramatic arts of South India from childhood and was keen to flourish in that context. His grandfather, Tanguthuri Prakasam, had from an early age been an actor who played female roles alongside his teacher, and before moving into film, Vijay had himself played a variety of roles on stage.¹¹⁷ Prior to his participation in *Karunamayudu* he had already appeared on screen alongside some of Telugu cinema's greats, Akkineni Nageshwara Rao and Vijaya Lalitha.¹¹⁸ The political history of his family may also have played a part in his allegiance to Telugu cinema, given that his grandfather was the first Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh and had

¹¹⁵ Janet Harbord, *Film Cultures* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), 9.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹¹⁷ See Sri Sathavahana, 'Vijaychander, Born to Perform Jesus', www.ilovehyd.com <http://www.ilovehyd.com/interviews/interviews-vijaychander-born-to-perform-jesus.html> (accessed 12 May 2005); Prakasam is better known as the first Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh. 'Tanguturi Prakasam Pantulu' <http://amazingtelugus.blogspot.com/2005/06/tanguturi-prakasam-pantulu.html> (accessed 20 August 2007)

¹¹⁸ Sathavahana.

been embroiled in local politics, eventually parting ways with the National Congress party in favour of regional concerns.¹¹⁹

Despite his familiarity with local theatre, however, Chander's approach to filmmaking does not match Chidananda das Gupta's caricature of popular film as quoted above. Chander was conscious that the camera invoked a very different economy of scale in the relationship between actor, viewer and screen than was characteristic of the stage. He told me that in acting school he had been taught that in cinema, more so than on stage, the eyes were a critical medium of character and expression.¹²⁰ One of his stated objectives, therefore, was for viewers to experience the compassion of Jesus through his eyes.¹²¹ Chander's sensitivity to the dynamics of cinema also serves as a warning against glossing the entire South Indian cinema industry with das Gupta's brush, or Coelho's, for that matter. That said, it is significant that the cinematic environment in which Chander was raised differed from that of Coelho's. As noted above, film criticism was apparently alive and well in Kerala, where Coelho was raised. In a telling contrast between the two states, das Gupta also noted ten years after *Karunamayudu's* release that despite having the highest number of screens in any state in India, the chief minister of Andhra Pradesh (Chander's home state) 'nearly had a fit' at the suggestion that schools begin teaching film appreciation.¹²²

The awards and plaques in Chander's home office are a testament to his eventual success, and he is still recognized in Andhra Pradesh for his role as Jesus in this film, as well as for his philanthropy.¹²³ Despite his initial aspirations however, it appears that over time his involvement with the film became less of a career vehicle and more an act of devotion to Christ, if not Christianity. Chander was emphatic that the film was not meant for evangelism of the sort practiced by Western missionaries; indeed, one of his primary objectives was to portray a 'Telugu' Jesus and not one who

¹¹⁹ 'Tanguthuri'.

¹²⁰ Vijay Chander, interview by the author, 16 November 2006, Hyderabad, India.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Das Gupta, 'The Painted Face of Politics', 137. Although Das Gupta does not name him directly, it is likely that he was referring to Nandamuri Taraka Rama Rao (NTR), one of Andhra Pradesh's most famous actors who was also Chief Minister when Das Gupta was writing. Atul Kohli, 'The NTR Phenomenon in Andhra Pradesh: Political Change in a South Indian State', *Asian Survey* 28, no. 10 (1988).

¹²³ <http://telugucinemass.blogspot.com/2007/06/telugu-actor-tsvijay-chander-donates-14.html> (accessed 26 December 2008).

spoke 'Western-Christianized Telugu'.¹²⁴ Whereas Coelho had hoped to raise the standard of Indian cinema through the making of *Karunamayudu*, Chander appears to have been intent on using local cinema as a way to free Jesus from his Western trappings.¹²⁵ His claim to having been infused with Jesus' spirit may seem enthusiastic, perhaps even a case of strategic marketing. I would argue, however, that the significance of *Karunamayudu* for Chander can be more fully appreciated if it is recognized as a devotional film informed by the *bhakti* tradition of Indian spirituality.¹²⁶

Very briefly, *bhakti* may be summarized as a devotional path to God that sidesteps the rational and hierarchical frameworks of Brahminism, and emphasizes piety and devotion as a path to God.¹²⁷ Indian film scholar Ravi Vasudevan has argued in his analysis of *Sant Tukaram* (1936), one of the better-known devotional films, that the genre has both represented and been a vehicle for promoting the *bhakti* tradition.¹²⁸ Furthermore, anti-Brahminism has for decades been a common theme in Telugu cinema.¹²⁹ Chander's claims about being indwelt by Jesus also reflect the devotional and non-sectarian language of *bhakti*, the impulse of which is reflected in his unwillingness to subsequently align himself with any religious tradition or Christian denomination. I suggest that *Karunamayudu* enabled Chander to combine his desires to strip away as many of Jesus' Western affiliations while simultaneously advocating an alternative spiritual path of devotion to him. Like D.G. Phalke of Indian cinema's early years, Chander merged Western technology with a local religious tradition, only this time he was attempting to recover Jesus for India, not displace him.

¹²⁴ Vijay Chander, interview by the author, 16 November 2006, Hyderabad.

¹²⁵ Ibid. As the analysis of *Karunamayudu* in the subsequent chapter suggests, he did not entirely escape the influence of Western sources.

¹²⁶ I am indebted to T. Vishnu for pointing me in this direction.

¹²⁷ 'Bhakti is both something that one does and an attitude that can suffuse all of one's actions. Bhakti can range from sober respect and veneration that upholds socio-religious hierarchies and distinctions to fervent emotional enthusiasm that breaks down all such hierarchies and distinctions in a radical soteriological egalitarianism'. John E. Cort, 'Bhakti in the Early Jain Tradition: Understanding Devotional Religion in South Asia', *History of Religions* 42, no. 1 (2002), 62. See also Robert L. Hardgrave, 'Politics and the Film in Tamilnadu: The Stars and the DMK', *Asian Survey* 13, no. 3 (1973); For Christian appropriations of the concept, see Robin H. S. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Madras, India: Christian Literature Society, 1969), 110-143.

¹²⁸ Ravi Vasudevan, 'Devotional Transformation: Miracles, Mechanical Artifice, and Spectatorship in Indian Cinema', *Postscripts* 1.2/1.3, no. (2005), 238.

¹²⁹ See Hardgrave, 'Politics and the Film in Tamilnadu: The Stars and the DMK'; Pandian.

7. Conclusion

This chapter and the last bring into sharp relief a range of contingencies that marked the production of *Karunamayudu*, including the tussle between Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, cinematic tastes and styles. As Coelho and Chander's attitudes to Indian cinema suggest, however, the influence of particular religious and theological traditions on a film's production are often bound up with a myriad other factors including but not limited to its principals' personal histories, political ideals, and cinematic tastes and the influence of earlier Jesus films. In the case of *Karunamayudu* there was also the interplay of religious and cultural traditions in India's cinematic history. Such a multiplicity of intersecting dynamics complicates attempts to define precisely what aspects of *Karunamayudu* might be used to designate it as an Indian film, or to articulate its religious or theological significance.¹³⁰ The question so often posed to me by Western acquaintances—Is *Karunamayudu* a good film?—becomes more difficult to answer if one has in view the various contingencies discussed in this chapter. The trans-national dynamics at work in the history of the film complicate efforts to demarcate with precision the influences of Western and Indian cultures or to identify the regional culture of India to which *Karunamayudu*'s cinematic Jesus belongs.

Granted, all films are hybrids, constructed from a combination of existing narratives and techniques. In my view, however, the Indianness of *Karunamayudu* as I have come to understand it has as much to do with the particular blend of stylistic conventions and allusions to local traditions, as with its site of origin, the languages in which it has been dubbed, or the nationality of its actors. An awareness of such nuances in the history of the film not only complicates simplistic assumptions about the film and its content but also invites reflection on the cultural and religious inflections in Western Jesus films. Such nuances also raise questions about the contours of Indian theology and Christological reflection in particular, a topic to which I return briefly in the last chapter. Perhaps most significantly, the above overview reinforces the formative dynamic of hybridity in the history of *Karunamayudu* specifically and Indian cinema in general. It is this sensitivity to the

¹³⁰ In chapter 8 I will return briefly to the question of *Karunamayudu*'s theological significance.

nuances of Indian cinema that informs my discussion in the next chapter of *Karunamayudu's* portrayal of a 'hybrid' Jesus.

CHAPTER FIVE

The content of *Karunamayudu*: A Hybrid Jesus

1. Introduction

A brief news item in the weekly Roman Catholic newsletter *The Tablet* reported that the script for *Karunamayudu* 'was written by Coelho but it was adapted to the style of Hindu mythology by the producers'.¹ The production history of the film recorded in chapter 3 affirms this general assertion. Since the author of the *Tablet* article did not indicate what aspects of the film were deemed mythological, however, it is one of my primary objectives in this chapter to discuss its nuanced portrayal of Jesus. Furthermore, I will argue that the film is designed to inspire and facilitate devotion to Jesus in a manner accessible to adherents of multiple religious traditions in India. I begin by discussing how the film's final structure and style differs from Fr. Christopher Coelho's original screenplay. Then I examine in some detail how *Karunamayudu* Indianises the story of Jesus. Finally, I demonstrate how the film is designed to inspire devotion to Jesus.² By way of introduction, I register some comments on the version of the film under review here, and provide a brief synopsis of the film.

2. Versions of *Karunamayudu*

The version of the film under review in this chapter is, to the best of my knowledge, a copy of the one released in cinemas in 1978, not the version currently available

¹ 'India', *The Tablet*, 9 February 1980, 142. A similarly worded claim was also made in 'Hindu's Jesus Film -- a Hit in India', *Action*, January (1980), 1.

² Thanks to T. Vishnu for encouraging me to think along these lines. By making this claim I am not trying to justify its association with a particular 'religious' genre but to understand the various agendas that informed its composition.

through online vendors or screened by Christian organizations.³ Since my decision to discuss the older and less accessible version admittedly makes it difficult for others to corroborate my claims, a brief defence for this decision is in order. On the one hand, the data I collected about the film's reception includes references both to the original release as well as the edited versions in circulation today. Therefore, I determined that analyzing the oldest and longest version of the film would be the best preparation for evaluating nuances in its reception. Second, I resolved that an awareness of what is missing from the more readily accessible versions may prevent viewers and critics from arriving at inadequate, if not faulty conclusions about the history and content of the film.⁴ Third, from a historical perspective, the older and more detailed the information, the better.⁵

3. Synopsis

Like most of the widely recognized Western movies of Jesus' life, *Karunamayudu* (1978) collates the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life.⁶ Woven into that harmonization are his encounters with five other main characters: Barabbas (Thyagaraju), Judas Iscariot, Mary Magdalene, the disciple John, and a blind man named Malachi (Chandra Mohan). Beginning with the annunciation of Jesus' birth to Mary, the story includes many of the standard narrative elements common to Jesus' life, his nativity, miracles, Sermon on the Mount and triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The portrayal of

³ Thanks to John Gilman of Dayspring International for providing me with this copy of the film. For more on the myriad copies and formats in which the film has been distributed, see chapter 6.

⁴ Parts of the following analysis may be found in Dwight Friesen, 'Karunamayudu: Seeing Christ Anew in Indian Cinema', in *Images of the Word: Hollywood's Bible and Beyond*, ed. David Shepherd (Atlanta: SBL, 2008).

⁵ Missing from most copies available today are the following scenes in chronological order: Caiaphas arriving at the temple; a dance for Herod by Mary Magdalene (intercut with scenes of her in what appears to be an imagined tryst with King Herod); a brief conversation between Barabbas and Judas Iscariot; Herodias and Herod discussing how to be rid of John the Baptist; Salome's dance and the beheading of John the Baptist; Jesus walking on water (missing from some but not all extant versions); Caiaphas' attempt to cajole Mary into helping him spoil Jesus' reputation; Jesus' healing of a woman who touches his cloak; Jesus' healing of a woman during his triumphal entry; a meeting between Judas Iscariot and Barabbas prior to Barabbas' arrest; a fight scene between Barabbas and Roman soldiers prior to his arrest; Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene following his resurrection.

⁶ The best-known exceptions to the harmonized approach to the story of Jesus are Piero Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964), John Krish & Peter Sykes's *Jesus* (1979), and Philip Saville's *The Gospel of John* (2003).

his passion, followed by his resurrection and ascension, occupies the second half of the movie. In one way or another, and at various stages in the story, each of the five characters mentioned above is won over by the compassion of Jesus (Vijay Chander). When we first meet them, Barabbas, Judas and their band of zealots are waging guerrilla warfare against Rome and attempting to forge a strategic alliance with the increasingly popular itinerant preacher named Jesus. When Jesus declines the offer, Barabbas turns away in anger, but Judas opts to join Jesus' disciples, believing that some form of alliance may still be achieved. John, who also becomes one of Jesus' disciples, is a Jew in search of a messiah. His blind friend Malachi laments the apparent absence of God's presence in a corrupt and unjust world. Mary Magdalene—portrayed as a courtesan—finds her longing for love and significance fulfilled in Jesus' forgiveness of a woman caught in adultery. The story concludes following Jesus' resurrection with his ascent into a galaxy of stars. In brief, *Karunamayudu* is the biopic of a 'hybrid' Jesus, a character that blends the protagonist of the Western Jesus film tradition with the god-men of India's religions and mythologies to inspire devotion to Jesus among the downtrodden of Indian society.⁷

4. Original screenplays vs. the final cut

The theatrical release of the film diverged from Coelho's screenplays in a number of ways.⁸ From a macro perspective, the primary shift that I have observed has to do with the larger context in which the film's narrative is set. I suggest that Coelho intended to set the story of Jesus against the backdrop of contemporary Indian culture, especially the intellectual dilemmas facing India's youth. Malachi the blind man (Manasseh in Coelho's scripts) is a pivotal character in the film whom Coelho wrote in to represent the '*young, intelligent, questioning audience*'.⁹ By contrast, the

⁷ My suggestion that one might speak of the film as a 'hybrid' Jesus was affirmed by Christopher Coelho, personal interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India. A discussion of the distinctions between these genres follows below.

⁸ Unless otherwise noted, the following discussion will make reference to copies of Coelho's original screenplays, written by Fr Christopher Coelho and held by this author.

⁹ Coelho (O.F.M.), 'Story, Dialogues and Screenplay, Along with Direction Notes for Karunama[sic]Yudu (Final Version)', 2. Italics mine.

final cut seems to represent a greater concern with Indianising Jesus' story as found in the Gospels, the responsibility for which Coelho has laid at the feet of Modukuri Johnson who reconfigured the film into a more literal representation of the biblical texts.¹⁰

Additionally, it is possible to observe a number of differences in the narrative structures of Coelho's original screenplays and *Karunamayudu*. Coelho's narratives all begin at the seaside with fishermen discussing the political future of Israel. By contrast, the first ten to fifteen minutes of *Karunamayudu* provide an account of Jesus' nativity culled from the Gospels. In Coelho's screenplays, the nativity of Jesus does not occur until approximately a third of the way through the movie, and then only as a flashback in his mother Mary's mind. The characters in Coelho's screenplays are also more numerous and developed than in the final version of the film. Missing in the final release are characters as diverse as John's family members, a Pharisee named Jehu, and a young boy who goes fishing only to end up in the scene where Jesus feeds five thousand people. In Coelho's script, Jesus' temptation scenes make no reference to the visible appearance of Satan. In the film, however, a snake and a black figure sporting a black cape, long nails and horns are used to represent the tempter. Also missing from the final cut is Jesus' trial before the Jewish council as well as his encounter with Mary Magdalene in the garden following his resurrection. Furthermore, in Coelho's script several flashbacks remind Jesus at various points of the temptations he faced in the wilderness, whereas in the final version they serve to recall various scenes of his life and ministry. These differences, however, are for the most part structural. Coelho was also keen to present Jesus as 'truly human' in keeping with a Lukan portrait of Jesus the merciful healer.¹¹ It was a vision of Jesus that he believed would be appealing in Indian culture. He contends, however, that the Hindu producers of *Karunamayudu* were more interested in casting him 'in the style of Hindu mythology, as a superman and magician doing the sensational'.¹² In other words, they wanted to make the film using conventions similar to those used to portray gods and goddesses in the mythological genre.

¹⁰ Fr. Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² 'Hindu's Jesus Film -- a Hit in India', 1. Coelho's claim that it was Hindus who advocated this shift, must be qualified by his assertion during one of my interviews with him that it was Modukuri Johnson, purportedly a Protestant, who wanted to portray Jesus as a Telugu film hero. Fr. Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006.

Unfortunately, Coelho's assertions, like the news clipping quoted in the introduction to this chapter, are not accompanied by supporting evidence to indicate exactly how and where he perceived the film's Hindu producers to have adapted his screenplays to their own ends. Furthermore, Coelho's complaints about the interference of the film's producers could imply that they rejected his vision for the film entirely. From my review of Coelho's screenplays and the theatrical release of *Karunamayudu*, however, I suggest that Coelho's assertions deserve some qualification. Granted, the final cut includes more of Jesus' miracles than Coelho would have preferred.¹³ Nevertheless, they are not portrayed using conventions common to Indian mythologicals; for example, no beams of light flow from Jesus' eyes or hands when he performs miracles.¹⁴ The only notable example of special effects used to represent Jesus' miraculous powers occurs when a series of rapid dissolves is used to portray Jesus' multiplication of loaves and fishes. Although Jesus performs miracles in the film, it is his compassion and his identification with the poor and oppressed that dominates the story. He is unafraid to touch a leper, he experiences hunger, he relieves suffering, feeds the hungry, and is at least respectful, if not caring, to everyone he meets, including Judas and Barabbas. He suffers terribly at the hands of Roman soldiers and imparts forgiveness, even to those who do not request it but apparently recognize him as a source of mercy. A leper, a woman caught in adultery, and Mary Magdalene all receive his pardon, apparently on the basis of their faith in him. Jesus may be a healer of many ills in *Karunamayudu*, but certainly not in a magical way.

On a related note, although Coelho reportedly wanted to emphasize Jesus' humanness, he also acknowledged the influence of Matthew's Gospel on his portrayal of Jesus, especially Matthew's fascination with, and response to, the words of Jesus.¹⁵ Consequently, Coelho's screenplays turned for the most part on Jesus' teaching about a new kingdom and a new way of seeing and responding to a broken world.¹⁶ In the final scene of the first draft, for example, John the disciple of Jesus,

¹³ Fr. Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India.

¹⁴ Ibid. These conventions are employed in the more recent Telugu Jesus film, *Shanti Sandesham* (2004).

¹⁵ Fr. Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India.

¹⁶ At one point in Coelho's first draft, Jesus is made to say, 'God's kingdom is the king of love, the kingdom of compassion. . . . Be concerned about love and about justice and all the rest will come to you'. Christopher Coelho (O.F.M.), *First Draft for the Screenplay of Karunamayudu*, 1st Draft ed. (1974), 55.

and Manasseh (Malachi) whom Jesus had healed of physical blindness, are walking together on a beach. Once troubled by the presence of evil in the world, Manasseh (Malachi) was able to say, 'After meeting Jesus, I can not say I have all the answers, but I have a new attitude, a new vision on life more precious than my physical eyesight'. Later, he added, 'Evil does not disturb me, but makes me more committed to help God in creating a new world'.¹⁷ The second and third drafts were shaped by a similar theme, although both ended more traditionally with Jesus' ascension.¹⁸

Given the assertion made *about Karunamayudu* at the outset of this chapter it is noteworthy that John Wijngaards, who encouraged Roman Catholic participation in the project, has acknowledged that the portrayal of Jesus' ascension was a deliberate allusion to Krishna.¹⁹ In the final scene, instead of ascending into the clouds, Jesus gets bigger and bigger until he dwarfs the crowd of disciples below him. According to Wijngaards, this was a deliberate nod to a mythological account of Krishna's return to the abode of the gods after appearing on earth in human form to restore righteousness in a world overcome by evil.²⁰ According to Wijngaards, the inclusion of this allusion in the film reflected a theological discussion contemporary to the period about the possibility that Hindu traditions could function as the Old Testament had for Christians, as a pointer to the revelation of Jesus as the Son of God and Saviour of the world.²¹ In other words, it was a deliberate exercise in inter-religious dialogue.

As the opening assertion in this chapter suggested, *Karunamayudu* does indeed represent a fusion of Coelho's screenplays and allusions to Hindu mythology. Those allusions, however, are not to be found in the spectacular aspects of the film, but in subtle allusions to Hindu myths and deities. This 'hybrid' of influences from Hindu mythological and Christian traditions encourages devotion to Jesus by incorporating devotional cues common to each. The portrayal of Christ's passion has

¹⁷ Ibid., 117.

¹⁸ Christopher Coelho (O.F.M.), 'Story, Dialogues and Screenplay for Karunamayudu Along with Direction Notes [Second Draft]', (Secunderabad: 1974); Christopher Coelho (O.F.M.), 'Story, Dialogues and Screenplay, Along with Direction Notes for Karunama[sic]Yudu [Final Version]', (1974).

¹⁹ John Wijngaards, telephone interview by the author, 05 April 2008.

²⁰ Although Wijngaards may have been referring to the *Uddhava Gita*, which recounts Krishna's instructions to a devotee before returning to his abode. Saraswati Ambikananda and Manisha Wilmette Brown, *The Uddhava Gita* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2000), 28.

²¹ John Wijngaards, telephone interview by the author, 05 April 2008.

always provided Christians with an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of his suffering for humanity. On the other hand, as I will discuss later in this chapter, Jesus is portrayed as a god-man whose presence is made accessible to devotees through a number of associations and visual techniques. That said, the film also subverts traditional understandings of Jesus in both traditions. It is uncommon in Hindu traditions for gods to suffer like human beings, and some Christians may interpret allusions to Hindu mythology in the film as a distortion; that is, if they notice them.

In sum, the film places complex demands on its viewers if they are to fully realize the implications of its portrait of Jesus. At the same time, by virtue of its hybridity and its emphasis on Jesus' compassion, it invites devotion from viewers representing a variety of religious traditions in India. As such, it functions like a devotional film.

5. *Karunamayudu* as a devotional film

As noted in the previous chapter it is difficult to associate *Karunamayudu* with a given genre common to Indian cinema. Like the 'superhit' *Jai Santoshi Maa* (1975), which follows the injustices and ultimate vindication experienced by a woman devotee to the goddess *Santoshi Maa*,²² it fits the description of a devotional, but has also been referred to as a mythological.²³ By virtue of its setting in first century Palestine, it could also qualify as a historical.²⁴ On the other hand, its subversive commentary on institutional religion leans in the direction of the social films common to Telugu cinema in the first half of the twentieth century.²⁵ My emphasis on *Karunamayudu*'s devotional impulse, however, was inspired by T. Vishnu, a student of Indian mythological films. He suggested to me that mythological and

²² The term 'superhit' is from Philip Lutgendorf, 'A Superhit Goddess: *Jai Santoshi Maa* and Caste Hierarchy in Indian Films' *Manushi* July-Aug, no. 131 (2002); Philip Lutgendorf, 'Jai Santoshi Maa Revisited: On Seeing a Hindu 'Mythological' Film', in *Representing Religion in World Cinema*, ed. S. Brent Plate (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003).

²³ Lutgendorf, 'Jai Santoshi Maa Revisited: On Seeing a Hindu 'Mythological' Film'.; Uma Maheshwari, personal email, 20 April 2006.

²⁴ Rachel Dwyer notes that mythologicals and devotionals are closely related to the historical. Rachel Dwyer, *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 65.

²⁵ For more on Telugu cinema, see chapter 4; See also Sai Prasad Alahari, 'From Resistance to Indifference? Seven Decades of Popular Telugu Cinema,' *Deep Focus* Jan - May, no. (2005): 25-34.

devotional films share a common agenda, to encourage devotion to the central deity or deities represented in the film. *Karunamayudu* fits the description, but with some qualification.

Ravi Vasudevan has argued that central to the devotional genre is a 'vision of self-transformation through the practice, sometimes even the condition of being, of devotion'.²⁶ The ultimate objective is access to the divine through a process that 'requires a great deal of social and cultural creativity, struggle and, very often, suffering'.²⁷ Invariably, this process has involved contesting a 'Brahmanical monopoly' over access to sacred texts, social and cultural hierarchies, codes of purity, and property.²⁸ Such impulses are common to the *bhakti* tradition of Hindu spirituality, which turns on the premise that God is accessible to anyone willing to follow a path marked by 'sacrifice, discipline and duty' as well as 'a religious attitude to the divine, often in the form of a personal relationship'.²⁹ Devotion to one's chosen deity is expressed orally, using the local vernacular and drawing especially on the tradition of singing devotional songs (*bhajans*) to a deity.³⁰

Iconicity, in the form of frontal address, is a dominant visual form in devotional films. Although frontal images of gods and goddesses are also common to mythological films, Rachel Dwyer suggests that what sets the devotional film apart is the way it constructs the spectator's relationship to the film. Whereas mythologicals tend to demand awe, devotionals are often constructed such that viewers may become included in the '*satsang* or community of worshippers'.³¹ Characters within the filmic narrative also tend to be framed in such a way that the teaching they receive from deities in the film might also be interpreted as a direct address to actual viewers. 'The key pay-off or return on the devotee's dissemination of the lord's glory, and, indeed, for the spectator of the genre, is the spectacle of the miraculous

²⁶ The following summary of the genre's elements are drawn from Vasudevan unless otherwise indicated. Ravi Vasudevan, 'Devotional Transformation: Miracles, Mechanical Artifice, and Spectatorship in Indian Cinema', *Postscripts* 1.2/1.3, no. (2005): 237-239.

²⁷ *Ibid.*: 238.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Dwyer, 66. See also 66-71.

³⁰ V. Raghavan, 'Methods of Popular Religious Instruction in South India' *The Journal of American Folklore* 71, no. 281 (1958); Milton Singer, 'The Great Tradition in a Metropolitan Center: Madras' *The Journal of American Folklore* 71, no. 281 (1958); Milton Singer, 'The Radha-Krishna 'Bhajans' Of Madras City' *History of Religions* 2, no. 2 (1963).

³¹ Dwyer, 65, 77.

happening'.³² Divine interventions can function in a number of ways in such narratives. They can validate the devotee and his or her supporters in the face of Brahmanical inquisition. They can result in a transfer of divine powers to the devotee in the narrative, and perhaps even evoke transformation in the community of the devotee.³³ Thus, Vasudevan argues, the efficacy of a devotional film is not simply a matter of accessing the sacred, 'but of being changed, collectively, into an image of the sacred'.³⁴

In my view, *Karunamayudu* fits squarely within this tradition by virtue of the way it functions, even though its focus is on Christ and not a one of the gods of the traditional Hindu pantheon. As I will demonstrate in the following paragraphs, Jesus is presented as a god-man who endures suffering and whose divine qualities are authorized by his ability to do miracles. Songs give shape to the narrative structure of the film, and are, effectively, *bhajans* to Jesus. The integrity of institutional religion is called into question and the film's visual conventions position viewers, as well as characters within the film, as recipients of Jesus' visual and pedagogical addresses. Ordinary people, especially the poor and oppressed, gain access to Jesus while the religious elites are portrayed as his enemies. Furthermore, Jesus' recompense for his suffering was to return to heavenly realms. His parting words to his disciples, prior to his ascension, implied that they, too, might achieve what he had by following his example and loving as he did. If *Karunamayudu* was designed to subvert the Brahmanical traditions of Hinduism, however, it does so only by association. It is more likely that Chander meant to call into question the monopoly of institutional Christianity over perceptions of Jesus in India.³⁵

Having established the thesis that *Karunamayudu* can be read as a devotional film, I devote the remainder of this chapter to a demonstration of how its producers adapted the story of Jesus to present him as a viable object of devotion for Indian

³² Vasudevan: 239.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.; As I will discuss briefly in Chapter 8, this understanding of the relationship between deity, devotee, and image is characteristic of *bhakti* traditions generally, and has links to a Saiva Siddhanta understanding of a guru's role in the life of a disciple.

³⁵ See R. S. Sugirtharajah, 'Indian Cowboy, Hindu Christ', *One World* 49 (1979). Chander told me personally that in his view, the villains of the film were the religious leaders. Vijay Chander, interview by the author, 16 Nov 2006, Hyderabad, India. I suspect, however, that he meant to attack institutional religion as a whole, not Judaism in particular.

viewers. In that sense, I suggest, the film's final structure and content indicates that Chander's vision of Jesus, and his objectives for the film trumped Coelho's in the end.³⁶ To design a film that would encourage devotion to Jesus without endorsing Western Christianity, however, the makers of *Karunamayudu* had to overcome an obstacle with which their Western counterparts never had to contend, a long standing perception that Jesus is a foreign god. Their solution was to make Jesus' story an Indian story.

6. The Indianness of *Karunamayudu*

Not long after *Karunamayudu* was released, Fr. Christopher Coelho was quoted as saying that the film would not likely be translated into European languages because 'culturally it is too Indian to be translated effectively'.³⁷ In other words, it makes demands and creates roles that many Western viewers may not be capable of responding to or fulfilling.³⁸ In this section, I address the Indianness of *Karunamayudu*, which, as I discussed in the previous chapter, has as much to do with its hybridity as with its geographic and cultural place of origin.

I have argued from the outset that both Coelho and Chander were keen to present Jesus as Indian. In his drafts of the screenplay, Fr. Christopher Coelho occasionally inserted notes about how he meant to present Jesus as Indian.³⁹ Likewise, Vijay Chander (producer / protagonist) stated explicitly in an interview that his intention was to attract people to Jesus but not in the way that Western missionaries would.⁴⁰ Lakshmi Srinivas has argued that it is a film's 'aesthetics,

³⁶ Chander has gone on to play other religious figures whose teachings and histories reflect the *bhakti* tradition. According to the internet Movie Data Base, Chander has also played *Sri Shirdi Sai Baba* (1986), *Yogi Vemana* (1988), and *Kabirdas* (2003).

³⁷ 'Hindu's Jesus Film -- a Hit in India', 3. For background on Coelho's perception of Indian film, see chapter 4.

³⁸ I refer here to Barker and Austin's thesis that films make demands on viewers or create roles for them to fulfill. Martin Barker and Thomas Austin, *From Antz to Titanic: Reinventing Film Analysis* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 41.

³⁹ See also chapter 3, 81.

⁴⁰ Sugirtharajah: 19.

music and mood and an affection for well-known stars' that makes it Indian.⁴¹ In this section I will identify and discuss a number of these conventions and how they were incorporated in *Karunamayudu* to portray Jesus' story as an Indian story, and thereby diffuse his reputation as a foreign god.

6.1 The film's title

The title of *Karunamayudu* does not immediately suggest that it is a Jesus film—no mention is made of Jesus, the cross, Christ, the Bible, or titles that have been commonly associated with Jesus films, 'King of Kings', for example.⁴² *Karunamayudu* in Telugu can be translated as 'Man of Compassion', but perhaps more evocatively, 'Embodiment of Mercy'.⁴³ Any suggestion that Jesus is only a man, however, is qualified immediately by the angel Gabriel's announcement to the beautiful Virgin Mary that she is going to give birth to the Son of God. Jesus, therefore, is identified from the outset as a god-man, perhaps an *avatar*, or manifestation of God. The designation, 'Embodiment of Mercy', is a phrase that has not only been attributed to Jesus by Christian theologians and preachers over the centuries, but is also attributed to Hindu gods.⁴⁴ Indeed, the Hindi title for the film is translated, 'Ocean of Mercy', a common phrase in *bhajans*, or devotional songs to various gods and goddesses.⁴⁵ By titling the film 'Man of Compassion' or 'Embodiment of Mercy', its producers associated Jesus with the highest ideals in a number of India's major religious traditions. The opening line of the Qu'ran, for example, describes Allah as 'the Entirely Merciful, the Especially Merciful'.⁴⁶ In

⁴¹ Lakshmi Srinivas, 'Communicating Globalization in Bombay Cinema: Everyday Life, Imagination and the Persistence of the Local', *Comparative American Studies* 3, no. 3 (2005): 338.

⁴² From the film's production history we learn that it was meant originally to be titled 'Raraju Kristu', or 'Christ, King of Kings', but we are dealing here with the final cut.

⁴³ Granted, no title is exclusively Christological, but given the history of Jesus films, it would not have been surprising if the producers of this film would have chosen a title similar to its Western predecessors.

⁴⁴ Sri Swami Sivananda, 'Temples in India', (Tehri-Garhwal, Uttar Pradesh: The Divine Life Society, 1957). <http://www.rsl.ukans.edu/~pkanagar/divine/> (accessed 05 Dec 2008), 30.

⁴⁵ Sri Swami Sivananda, 'Temples in India', 8.

⁴⁶ Saheed International, ed. *The Qu'ran: English Meanings* (London: Abul-Qasim Publishing House, 2004), 1.

Buddhist thought, compassion has been understood as the 'root motivation of the *bodhisattva*', or the one pursuing enlightenment.⁴⁷ Hindu *bhajans*, or devotional songs praise Krishna as the 'Ocean of Compassion'.⁴⁸

6.2 Local actors

The precedent for employing well-known actors in a Jesus film was set notoriously by George Stevens in his grand epic, *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965). Despite his initial commitment to working with unknowns, Stevens' cast eventually became a 'who's who' of Hollywood stars—one of the most memorable being John Wayne in the role of the centurion.⁴⁹ *Karunamayudu* might well be considered the Indian equivalent of Stevens' film. Although prior to taking the role of Jesus, Vijay Chander had appeared onscreen beside Telugu film stars such as Akkineni Nageshwara Rao and Vijaya Lalitha, a number of other actors cast in the movie were even better-known.⁵⁰ Chandra Mohan (Malachi) and Jaggaiah (Pilate) are two of the most recognizable Telugu film stars in the movie. Their star power may have played as significant a role in attracting viewers as the relative novelty of the film's subject. One woman I interviewed told me that she went to see the film specifically because Mohan and Jaggaiah were associated with it.⁵¹

It practically goes without saying that one would employ Indian actors in an Indian film. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that *Karunamayudu* is one of the first films of Jesus' life to feature an Indian actor in the role of Jesus. Although for some Western viewers this may be disorienting, one need only consider how many

⁴⁷ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 210.

⁴⁸ M. Case, *Seeing Krishna: The Religious World of a Brahman Family in Vrindaban* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 39-41. The above two paragraphs were recently published almost verbatim in Dwight Friesen, 'Showing Compassion and Suggesting Peace in *Karunamayudu* an Indian Jesus Film', *Studies in World Christianity* 14, no. 2 (2007).

⁴⁹ Lloyd Baugh, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997), 27-28.

⁵⁰ Sri Sathavahana, 'Vijaychander, Born to Perform Jesus', [www.ilovehyd.com](http://www.ilovehyd.com/interviews/interviews-vijaychander-born-to-perform-jesus.html)
<http://www.ilovehyd.com/interviews/interviews-vijaychander-born-to-perform-jesus.html> (accessed 12 May 2005).

⁵¹ Personal interview with the author, 04 December 2006, Bangalore, India.

different English accents Jesus has spoken in a century of appearances on the silver screen, ostensibly in the role of a first century Jew.

6.3 Music, songs, and dances

If the appearance of Indian actors provides an immediate visual clue that the film was produced in India, the soundtrack provides an oral one. That *Karunamayudu's* soundtrack was a local production was reinforced to me one day while waiting for a train near Hyderabad. I heard music reminiscent of *Karunamayudu's* soundtrack begin to play and I looked up at the nearby television, half expecting to see the film's credits flickering on the screen. Instead, I saw an advert for a newly released movie (2006).

Western viewers in particular may find Indian film music disconcerting, but music is arguably 'the heart and soul of Indian film' and its significance in the analysis of Indian film must not be downplayed.⁵² Indeed, film music might be called 'the soundtrack of everyday life' on the subcontinent.⁵³ Stereotypically described as a 'hybrid' of external influences and classical Indian musical traditions, film music is deemed so important to the success of most Indian movies that few stars are trusted to sing the songs they perform on screen.⁵⁴ Given the popularity of playback singers, the appeal of *Karunamayudu* may be attributed, at least in part, to the fact that its lead vocalist was S. P. Balasubramanyam (a.k.a. SPB), one of the most popular and recognized vocalists in South Indian cinema. Not only has he reportedly recorded over 36,000 songs in 35 years, he won the *FilmFare* Award for 'Best Playback Singer' as recently as 2006.⁵⁵ John Wijngaards informed me that very often a film's central theme is articulated in song.⁵⁶ In *Karunamayudu* the central questions are posed in the song sung by Malachi, the blind man, who questions the existence of

⁵² Manjunath Pendakur, *Indian Popular Cinema: Industry, Ideology and Consciousness* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc., 2003), 119.

⁵³ Srinivas: 336.

⁵⁴ Pendakur, 124–126; 138–139.

⁵⁵ <http://spbindia.com/News.aspx> (accessed 17 June 2008).

⁵⁶ John Wijngaards, telephone interview by the author, 05 April 2008, Edinburgh, Scotland.

God in the world and ends his song with the question, 'God, if you care about us, why don't you come yourself?'⁵⁷

Music permeates *Karunamayudu*. Especially notable are *karnatic* influences on the soundtrack, a singing narrator, the pivotal role of a blind man's musical lament in shaping the narrative, and choreographed dances. The hybridity of the soundtrack alluded to earlier is most obvious during the nativity scenes. Every time the camera cuts to the baby Jesus or pulls back for a shot of the stable, the music abruptly shifts from a lilting *karnatic* instrumental to a rendition of *Silent Night* complete with pipe organ and a vocal chorus.⁵⁸ There is an additional dynamic to the film's score that deserves further attention but which I will only make note of here. According to classical theories of Indian music and drama there are at least eight *rasas* (moods, emotions, flavours) that musicians and actors are trained to express in such a way that 'both the performer and the partaker can "taste" the emotion, the rasa'.⁵⁹ Since one of the *rasas* is *karuna*, a mix of grief and compassion, it may be that the film's soundtrack itself was composed to invoke compassion in a manner that would transcend language.

In addition to the instrumental dimension of the sound track, the film included at the time of its theatrical release the formulaic songs and dances that have come to be associated with Indian cinema. Two of those dances, which have for various reasons been excised from most of the versions publicly available, not only add voyeuristic spice to the narrative, but also give shape to the narrative.⁶⁰ In the first instance Mary Magdalene performs a dance for Herod and his officials. As she does so, the camera cuts back and forth to sexually charged scenes of her with a man, who, through the translucent fabric hanging around her bed, appears to be King Herod. The implication is that Herod is either a philanderer or a lustful old man, but

⁵⁷ This is Wijngaards' translation. John Wijngaards, telephone interview by the author, 05 April 2008, Edinburgh, Scotland.

⁵⁸ The film also features a number of other orchestral pieces. Although they were reportedly uncommon in Indian film at the time, both Coelho and Chander deemed their inclusion appropriate to the scale of the story (personal interview with Coelho, 18 February 2006). For more on the hybridity of Indian film music, see Anna Morcom, 'An Understanding between Bollywood and Hollywood? The Meaning of Hollywood-Style Music in Hindi Films' *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 10, no. 1 (2001). Carnatic [karnatic] music is a term commonly associated with South India.

⁵⁹ Richard Schechner, 'Rasaesthetics', *The Drama Review* 45, no. 3 (2001): 31.

⁶⁰ As John Gilman reported these scenes attracted the farmers. John Gilman, interview by the author, 04 July, 2005, Three Bridges, London, UK.

the scene also introduces Mary Magdalene's character. Edited versions of the film used for evangelism today do not include Mary's dance. Consequently, she appears for the first time as a tearful observer of Jesus when he forgives an adulterous woman. Without her backstory or familiarity with biblical texts or Christian traditions, therefore, one would be at some loss to know why she is pictured in the next scene washing Jesus' feet.⁶¹ The second dance features a voluptuous Salome dancing for Herod, and in return receiving the head of John the Baptist on a platter.⁶² Salome's dance has also been excluded from recent versions of the film, along with the accompanying scene of John the Baptist's beheading. Consequently, its elision has no noticeable effect on the narrative.

Another technique common to the ancient dramatic traditions of India is to communicate narrative through song. The establishing shot in *Karunamayudu* is of Mary reading in a garden. As the camera circles around her in a slow pan and then zooms in to a medium close-up in soft-focus, the narrator, or *bhagavata* in South Indian tradition, begins to sing about her beauty and status as the mother of God's son.⁶³ Following the annunciation of the angel Gabriel, he adopts the role of singing title card, weaving together a series of mini-tableaux into a visual harmonization of Jesus' birth and childhood. Later, during Jesus' passion he assumes the additional posture of commentator, combining flashbacks and exhortation in a winsome invitation to reflect on the meaning of Jesus' suffering.

6.4 Narrative style

In classical Hollywood narrative, plots, character development and causality typically follow a linear progression.⁶⁴ By contrast, Indian feature films, in the spirit of India's grandest epics, are stereotypically non-linear, interrupted by sub-plots,

⁶¹ According to Christian tradition, Mary Magdalene has often been understood to be the prostitute who washed Jesus' feet (Matt 26:6-8). That interpretation, however, is no longer widely accepted.

⁶² In both cases, Coelho's direction notes indicate that dancing women should not be portrayed in a way that would offend Christian sensibilities.

⁶³ Martha Bush Ashton, 'Yakshagana. A South Indian Folk Theatre' *The Drama Review* 13, no. 3 (1969): 152; alternatively, in Sanskrit theatre, the *sutradhara*.

⁶⁴ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), Ch. 2.

dances or comedic interludes.⁶⁵ Likewise, in *Karunamayudu* Jesus' story is intercut with a sub-plot featuring Judas Iscariot and Barabbas as co-revolutionaries. Also punctuating the story are fights, dances, and in the original, an apparent love interest between Caiaphas the high priest and Mary Magdalene.⁶⁶

It may be tempting for those accustomed to narrative closure in a movie to dismiss non-linear narratives as unsophisticated. Sheila J. Nayar, however, has argued convincingly that the success of India's feature films has depended largely on their directors' ability to churn out stories accessible to people with few literacy skills. This, in turn, requires the use of devices commonly used in oral story-telling to keep the narrative 'manageable, memorable, and uncomplicated'.⁶⁷ In particular, she has discussed flashbacks and the appropriation of scenes, characters and plots from other movies as devices in the Indian filmmaker's toolkit. A number of these techniques are observable in *Karunamayudu*.

1436.5 Flashbacks

Although flashbacks have been employed in two recent Jesus films, Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) and Philip Saville's *Gospel of John* (2003), Chander may be the first to have used them so extensively in a movie of Christ's life. Furthermore, in contrast to Gibson's film, or even Saville's, Chander's flashbacks refer primarily to the inner diegesis of the film—that is, they consist of scenes previously screened in the film. Whereas Gibson and Saville could assume a minimal degree of biblical literacy among viewers, one cannot assume in India that viewers will be familiar with the details of Jesus' life. In *Karunamayudu*, therefore, flashbacks are used to remind, reinforce and explain.

For example, the first flashback is inserted in a scene where, as in Ray's film, Jesus visits his mother toward the end of his ministry. Upon entering her house, he

⁶⁵ Philip Lutgendorf, 'Is There an Indian Way of Filmmaking?', *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 10, no. 3 (2006), 242. The one comic interlude in *Karunamayudu* occurs between vendors and priests in the temple precincts just before Jesus comes to clear them out.

⁶⁶ Christopher Coelho (O.F.M.), 'Story, Dialogues and Screenplay, Along with Direction Notes for Karunama[I]Yudu (Final Version)', (1974), 14.

⁶⁷ Sheila J. Nayar, 'Invisible Representation', *Film Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2004): 16.

bows at her feet, then stands up and holds her in a warm embrace. As she reaches up to wipe his brow with her shawl, the camera cuts to a flashback of an earlier sequence in which she wiped his brow when he was at work in Joseph's carpenter shop. The flashback reinforces the significance of Mary's role in Jesus' life as well as the pivotal role of the mother in Indian culture and filmic narratives.⁶⁸ A second flashback occurs when the imprisoned Barabbas is granted amnesty instead of Jesus. For a split second Barabbas recalls Jesus' response when invited to join forces with Barabbas against the Romans. In a gentle but steady tone, Jesus had replied, 'If [I] needed I will die for you, but I cannot grant your wish, Barabbas'. The flashback in this case is a reminder to Barabbas, and to viewers, of Christ's non-violent ways. Yet, it is also a segue to Christ's passion where flashbacks are used to complement the narrator's commentary. Three flashbacks occur during Jesus' *via crucis*, each at a scene replicating one of the Stations of the Cross.⁶⁹ In the first, as Jesus is pelted with stones, the camera cuts to the basket of bread from which he had multiplied loaves and fishes to feed the five thousand. The narrator noted that Jesus, who had miraculously provided bread for the hungry, was now being persecuted by people with stony hearts. Following the 'Veronica' scene, in which a woman wipes Jesus' bloody face with a cloth only to discover his portrait imprinted on it, there is a flashback of Jesus healing a leper following his Sermon on the Mount. The one who healed is now being lashed. After Jesus falls again, a third flashback depicts his disciples running for safety in the garden of Gethsemane. This time the narrator bemoans Jesus' betrayal by his closest friends. The presence of flashbacks in a film does not make it Indian, but flashbacks are, indeed, a characteristic of many Indian films.

6.6 Cinematic allusions

Most of the cinematic allusions in *Karunamayudu* appear to refer to its Western predecessors. This observation reinforces Richard Walsh's suggestion that every

⁶⁸ On women in Indian cinema, see Booth, Gregory D. 'Traditional Content and Narrative Structure in the Hindi Commercial Cinema'. *Asian Folklore Studies* 54, no. 2 (1995): 169-190.

⁶⁹ Devotional music has been a common feature of religious instruction and dissemination in South India for centuries. See Raghavan: 342.

recent film of Christ's life is in some sense, a 'follower film'.⁷⁰ Given that the inspiration for the Indian cinema industry has itself been attributed to the influence of a Western movie of Jesus' life, it should not be surprising to find allusions to classics from the genre. Terry Lindvall has noted, for example, that for decades Christians showed Cecil B. DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1927) throughout India.⁷¹ It may come as no surprise, then, that the first working title for *Karunamayudu* was *Raraju Kristu*—Telugu for 'Christ, King of Kings'—or that a few 'quotations' from DeMille's film appear in *Karunamayudu*.⁷² When the religious leaders in DeMille's film confront Jesus with an adulterous woman, he bends down and writes the sins of her accusers in Hebrew on the temple floor.⁷³ For the sake of viewers, the symbols are conveniently translated into English using special effects. In a parallel scene in *Karunamayudu*, no special effects are employed, but when Jesus bends down to write in the sand, the woman's accusers run away shouting that Jesus is writing their sins on the ground.⁷⁴ Furthermore, as in DeMille's film, Judas is portrayed in *Karunamayudu* as a political opportunist who attempts to crown Jesus on a number



Fig. 4. Screenshots of Mary teaching Jesus. Left: Screenshot, *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912), Copyright, Kino Video, 1994; Right: Screenshot from *Karunamayudu* (1978), Copyright, Radha Chitra Studios.

of occasions. More anecdotally, both films feature a Star of David in the quarters of Caiaphas and a large eagle behind Pilate's throne.

Another possible allusion to

a Western film in *Karunamayudu* involves the very earliest feature length film of

⁷⁰ Richard Walsh, *Reading the Gospels in the Dark* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 25.

⁷¹ Terry Lindvall, *Sanctuary Cinema: Origins of the Christian Film Industry* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2007), 193. A number of people mentioned to me casually or in semi-structured interviews that they had also seen DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956).

⁷² Coelho (O.F.M.), *First Draft for the Screenplay of Karunamayudu*.

⁷³ In the first instance, the word Jesus writes appears to be a mix of Hebrew and Greek letters.

⁷⁴ To my recollection, this particular pericope does not appear in the other major Jesus movies that preceded the release of *Karunamayudu*.

Christ's life. Fig. 4 suggests that Chander's depiction of Mary teaching Jesus from a scroll in the first segment of *Karunamayudu* shows remarkable similarities to Sidney Olcott's *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912).

6.7 Emotion

As noted in the previous chapter, when Indian filmmakers Indianise the plots of Western films, they often heighten the emotional tensions in those stories. In contrast to Paul Schrader, who dismissed Jesus films for being too overt in their efforts to 'evoke the appropriate emotions', *Karunamayudu*, like many other Indian films, is unabashed in its design to stir viewers' sentiments.⁷⁵ There is the pathos of the blind Malachi's imprecatory song about the absence of God in the world that precedes Jesus's ministry. Joyful dancing marks Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem, and a melancholy ballad of sorts weaves through Jesus' *via crucis*. Cut into the latter sequence are myriad shots of Jesus' tearful followers, especially Mary Magdalene and Mary. The structure of *Karunamayudu* reinforces the observation made above that the emotional dynamics of Indian cinema are generally tied closely to a movie's songs.

Although space does not allow for an in-depth analysis of emotion in Indian film it is worth considering Richard Schechner's observation that in contrast to Western theatre, where 'spectators respond sympathetically to the "as if" of characters living out a narrative', partakers in 'rasic theatre . . . empathize with the experience of the performers playing.' In other words, they identify 'with the performer rather than with the plot'.⁷⁶ That at least some Indian viewers have been conditioned to engage with cinematic narratives in this fashion may help to explain the dynamics in the emotional responses to *Karunamayudu* that have dominated reports of its reception among film evangelists. Such a theory would also introduce

⁷⁵ Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972), 4. According to Clive Marsh, sentiment is an important dynamic of the film-going experience that deserves to be revisited. Clive Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment: Film's Challenge to Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2004), 87-95.

⁷⁶ Richard Schechner, 'Rasaesthetics,' *The Drama Review* 45, no. 3 (2001).

some constructive comparisons with Clive Marsh's work on the relationship between cinema, sentiment and theology in the West.⁷⁷

6.8 Framing

In chapter 4 I discussed at some length Ashish Rajadhyaksha's argument that D.G. Phalke transferred the *darshan*ic function of two-dimensional god pictures to the cinematic frame by incorporating extended frontal shots of deities or saints.⁷⁸ A similar technique was employed in *Karunamayudu*, perhaps to facilitate *darshan* with Jesus. On three occasions in *Karunamayudu* extreme close-ups of Jesus' eyes are cut into the narrative to demonstrate the power of his gaze.⁷⁹ In each case the person who encounters Jesus undergoes a change of heart. The first instance begins with a medium-wide shot of Matthew the tax collector harassing a merchant to pay his taxes. When the merchant asks Matthew what he will do if he does not pay, Matthew grabs a tray of egg and throws them behind him, initially unaware that they have just landed at Jesus' feet. Prompted by the merchant, Matthew spins around to find Jesus surrounded by his disciples and staring at him. Embarrassed, Matthew hurries over to apologize for not seeing Jesus there, at which point Jesus replies that Matthew sees him all the time. Matthew responds by asking how, if that was the case, he could have thrown the eggs. Jesus does not answer. Instead, the camera cuts to an extreme close-up of his eyes that is held for several seconds. A reverse shot focuses on a close-up of Matthew's face, who simply utters 'Master!' and Jesus replies, 'Follow me'. In the next scene, Matthew is pictured serving Jesus a meal in his home and declaring his willingness to follow Jesus. The shot / reverse shot technique is employed in a way that viewers also are confronted by Jesus' gaze and hear the words, 'Follow me'. As a result of this *darshan*ic encounter, Matthew becomes a disciple of Jesus, as does Judas Iscariot in a later scene. Additionally, in a

⁷⁷ Clive Marsh, *Cinema & Sentiment: Film's Challenge to Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2004).

⁷⁸ Ashish Rajadhyaksha, 'The Phalke Era: Conflict of Traditional Form and Modern Technology', *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 14-15 (1987), 65-67.

⁷⁹ It is noteworthy that a similar convention occurs at least once in Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings* (1961).

wordless vignette during Jesus' triumphal entry, he appears to heal a woman simply by gazing at her.

Iconic encounters of a similar nature are also made possible by frontal medium close-ups of Jesus when he is teaching. Two notable examples include his Sermon on the Mount and at the Last Supper when he breaks the bread and distributes the wine. In both cases he is framed in a head and shoulders shot and stares directly into the camera while speaking. Finally, I suggest that the cinematography in *Karunamayudu* reflects what Gayatri Chatterjee has referred to as the 'bottom-frame' technique common to Indian film.⁸⁰ She argues that in contrast to the major studios in America, Indian cinema often introduces characters and scenes by moving up from the bottom of the frame rather than from left or right.⁸¹ A quick scan of *Karunamayudu* demonstrates that its directors employed the technique often. The approach of Barabbas's band of zealots, the introduction of Jesus at the Jordan River, and the introduction of Malachi's song are but three examples.

6.9 Duration

Finally, *Karunamayudu* lives up to the expectation that Indian movies should be long.⁸² My copy of the original has a running time of approximately two hours and forty minutes, whereas most versions commercially available run around two hours and fifteen minutes. These characteristics of *Karunamayudu* demonstrate how it Indianised Jesus' story using conventions common to Indian cinema. In order to challenge perceptions of Jesus as a foreign god, however, the producers also wove into the story allusions to Hindu mythology.⁸³

⁸⁰ Gayatri Chatterjee, 'Icons and Events: Reinventing Visual Construction in Cinema in India', in *Bollyworld: Popular Indian Cinema through a Transnational Lens*, ed. Raminder Kaur and Ajay J. Sinha (New Delhi: Sage, 2005), 114.

⁸¹ Ibid., 115.

⁸² Satyajit Ray, the famous Bengali filmmaker once noted that Indian films 'must not be below two and a half hours in length'. The expectation was 'so rigid', he argued, that 'a film which disregards it may never see the light of day'. Satyajit Ray, *Our Films, Their Films*, 1st U.S. ed. (New York: Hyperion Books, 1994), 41.

⁸³ 'India'.

7. *Karunamayudu*: the hybrid Jesus

So far I have not devoted much space to a discussion of the Christian aspects of the film. References to the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life are perhaps the most obvious. Additionally, however, there are some distinctly Roman Catholic influences in the film, especially during the scenes of Jesus' passion.⁸⁴ Coelho confirmed in conversation that the Roman Catholic devotional tradition of the Stations of the Cross provides the narrative structure for Jesus' *via cruces*. Jesus falls at least three times, and at one point, in keeping with the 'Veronica' tradition, a woman comes forward to wipe Jesus' face only to find his countenance miraculously transferred to the cloth in her hands. The portrayal of Mary Magdalene as a courtesan / prostitute is also in keeping with Christian tradition, if not the biblical text.⁸⁵ As already noted, traditional Western Christian music is employed in the soundtrack, most noticeably at Jesus' birth. Coelho also informed me that during the scene where Jesus washes his disciples' feet at the Last Supper, he can be heard humming one bar of the Latin hymn, '*Ubi Caritas et amor, Deus ibi est*' (Where are love and charity, there God is).⁸⁶ In keeping with the unsavoury history of Christian antagonism toward the Jewish leaders for their culpability in Jesus' death, the Jewish leaders in the story are cast as conniving villains and their machinations overdone. It is hard to say, however, given the lack of anti-Semitism in India, whether this was a vestige of that long standing tradition or if it was meant to be a caricature of religious leaders generally. That said, Jesus' trial before the Jewish leaders, which was included in Coelho's screenplay, is absent from the final cut. Unsurprisingly, given Coelho's background, there is a strong emphasis—however brief—on the importance of Mary as the mother of Jesus. Finally, Jesus' crucifixion is depicted in graphic detail that anticipates Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).

What makes *Karunamayudu* unique is that even though it reflects biblical accounts with fidelity, it simultaneously locates Jesus in the realm of Hindu

⁸⁴ In Coelho's screenplays Jesus teaches about the day of judgement when the Son of Man will distinguish between the sheep and the goats (Matt 25: 34-41). Coelho indicated that still photographs of the poor, including an image of Mother Teresa, be shown during this scene.

⁸⁵ Coelho acknowledged that the portrayal of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute was a nod to tradition, not the scriptural text. Fr. Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India.

⁸⁶ Fr. Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India.

mythology through the use of subtle allusions to deities and texts commonly associated with the *bhakti* tradition. I have already mentioned the allusions to Hindu mythology in the title of the film, but there are myriad other such nuances and allusions throughout. At Jesus' birth, for example, and much to Coelho's chagrin, a beam of light proceeds from the star above the stable directly onto Jesus' face.⁸⁷ This is a common convention in mythological movies to indicate manifestations of divine powers or emanations from the realms of the gods.

During Jesus' temptation the camera alternates between medium and wide-angle shots of him praying and glimpses of an eagle circling overhead. At least twice, the latter are interspersed with a close-up of an owl's face. Then the devil appears in the form of a snake to tempt Jesus.⁸⁸ On one level these scenes could be understood as environmental shots, evoking the isolation of the desert. In ancient mythologies, however, the eagle and reptiles have been understood to represent opposing forces in the universe.⁸⁹ Furthermore, one informant told me that an owl is seen as a bad omen.⁹⁰ In extreme cases, he told me, if an owl enters the home of a devout Hindu the residence may be vacated until it can be ensured that the home has been ritually purified.⁹¹ Furthermore, according to Coelho, Chander insisted that the devil be portrayed as a black figure in the film, because that is the way he is always portrayed in mythological movies.⁹² Another local superstition is alluded to when the disciples are pictured in a boat being tossed about by a vicious squall. They cry out in fear noting that many people have drowned in that area, as if to suggest that the storm is the work of disturbed spirits.

I have already discussed the use of close-ups of Jesus' eyes that could indicate the possibility of *darshan* with Jesus. Furthermore, his characteristics imply that he is a *sadhu* (holy man). Although his tunic was usually white, it was often draped with a

⁸⁷ Fr. Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India.

⁸⁸ This is a variation from Coelho's original screenplays which only use the sound of wind to indicate the presence of evil. Yet he also told me that he was in favour of using the snake with a voice-over to represent Satan. Fr. Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India.

⁸⁹ K. Krishnamurthy, *Mythical Animals in Indian Art* (New Delhi: Abhinav, 1984), 19.

⁹⁰ Ibid. Reference to the owl from Rev. S, interview by the author, 17 Jan 2006, Secunderabad, India.

⁹¹ Rev. S, interview by the author, 17 Jan 2006, Secunderabad, India..

⁹² Fr. Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India.

red (ochre) sash.⁹³ He is also always self-controlled and moves very deliberately, unlike many of the Western filmic Jesuses.⁹⁴

During Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the crowds throw flowers on him, a practice common to the honour of auspicious persons or the parading of deities. Yet it is also an activity integral to Hindu worship, or *puja*, that involves bedecking the statue of a deity with flowers.⁹⁵ These allusions to other divine figures and religious practices generate a sense of ambiguity about Jesus' divinity that deserves more critical attention. Identifying Jesus as (a) god, even a god-man or *avatar* is not necessarily to grant him the pride of place as the unique Son of God traditionally espoused by the formative creeds of Christianity.⁹⁶

Furthermore, Jesus' mission of restoration echoes that of Krishna, who explains to Arjuna in the *Bhagavadgita* that 'whenever and wherever there is a decline in religious practice' he appears to restore the true principles of religion.⁹⁷ That ideal is compassion to all. Over and over again Jesus is portrayed demonstrating compassion to the poor and oppressed, beginning with the healing of a mute man, and followed by his touching and healing of a leper after delivering his Sermon on the Mount. He shows no fear of enemies, or of breaking social conventions. When the cunning Judas asks to join Jesus' group of followers, they object. Jesus, however, accepts Judas with a hug and reminds the rest that the sun that his father created shines on everyone equally. In contrast to the fate of adulterous woman whose death is portrayed in the context of Malachi's lament, Jesus forgives an adulterous woman brought to him for judgment. This act of mercy observed by Mary Magdalene inspires her faith in him and Jesus declares her forgiven. Malachi, whose lament about the absence of God introduces the adult Jesus, is healed by Jesus of his physical blindness and retracts his original accusations. Out of compassion for the

⁹³ His costuming is often very reminiscent of Jeffrey Hunter's Jesus in *King of Kings* (1961).

⁹⁴ One of the comments I often heard was that he was thus perceived as more Indian than Western cinematic Jesuses.

⁹⁵ Diana L. Eck, *Darsān: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 2nd rev. and enl. ed. (Chambersburg, PA: Anima Books, 1985), 47-49.

⁹⁶ Robin H. S. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Madras, India: Christian Literature Society, 1969).

⁹⁷ Shlokas 4.7, 4.8 in A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, *Bhagavad-Gita as It Is*, trans., A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, Complete Edition, Revised and Enlarged ed. (Los Angeles: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1990), 226, 228. Tensions over whether Jesus should be treated as an *avatar* have been an important strand in theological debates about Jesus in India. See Boyd, 77-81.

hungry crowds that have gathered to hear him teach, Jesus feeds them by miraculously causing loaves of bread and fish to multiply. He raises Lazarus from the dead, and during his entry into Jerusalem is praised by the crowds for his compassion. On the cross Jesus forgives the repentant criminal at his side, who turns out to be one of Barabbas's right hand men. Later, after his resurrection, he shows compassion on Peter for betraying him and invites the doubting Thomas to assuage doubts by touching his wounds. Finally, before ascending into the stars, he commands his disciples that love is the expression of religion that pleases his father.

There are also numerous visual references to feet, especially Jesus' feet, in the movie. When John the Baptist announces his arrival, the camera focuses first on his feet and then slowly moves upward till his face becomes visible. The leper kisses Jesus' feet after being healed. Mary Magdalene washes his feet with her tears. Then during Jesus' *via cruces* the camera cuts repeatedly to his bloody feet and at one point he stops to pull a long thorn from the sole of his foot. The singing narrator emphasizes his 'holy feet' being anointed by blood and kissed by the earth. References to feet in Hindu worship of various kinds are common. Milton Singer reports that a climax of singing *bhajans* (devotional songs) could involve devotees embracing one another and then rolling 'on the floor to take the dust of each other's feet'.⁹⁸ Devotees would also praise 'the two glorious feet' of their guru.⁹⁹ Hymns to various gods and goddesses are replete with references to their feet, or the worship of their feet.¹⁰⁰ As already briefly discussed, Jesus' ascension is also reminiscent of Krishna's return to the abode of the gods. The celestial frame into which he expands also reflects the conventions used to portray the realms of the gods in movies. There are clouds and sparkling stars everywhere.

I have not mentioned every allusion to Hindu mythology, verse, religious practice, or terminology embedded in the movie. Nevertheless, I suggest that what I have noted provides sufficient evidence to suggest that the movie was meant to present Jesus as worthy of devotion along the lines of any other Hindu god or goddess. Furthermore, by revealing Jesus in the context of the cinema it subverted the control of institutionalized Christianity over Jesus' image by removing the

⁹⁸ Singer, 'The Great Tradition in a Metropolitan Center: Madras': 355.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Sivananda, 6, 21.

discourse about Jesus from the traditional structures and hierarchies of the Christian community to the cinema. For many Christians in India cinema-going has been a kind of unspoken taboo, not unlike that which marked conservative North American Christianity for decades. I have been told that for many Christians, going to see *Karunamayudu* marked the first time they ever entered the cinema.¹⁰¹ At the same time, however, Christians who may be oblivious to the allusions to Hindu mythology in the film will find a story of Jesus quite consistent with the Gospels' portrayal of Jesus as the compassionate one, full of grace.

Perhaps the most definitive aspect of *Karunamayudu*'s portrayal of Jesus, however, is his suffering. The suffering of the gods is not a common theme in either mythological or devotional movies. Jesus presents a paradox in this regard, because although he suffers as a human being, the content of the film also indicates that he is God or a god-man. Granted, *sadhus* or holy ascetics suffer austerity and sometimes ridicule. In *Sant Tukaram* (1936), an iconic example of the devotional genre in Indian cinema, Tukaram undergoes considerable rejection and abuse for his dedication to the deity Pandurang. In the end, however, his single-heartedness is vindicated when he is swept into the realm of the gods. Jesus' story, however, is more akin to that of Krishna, in that having accomplished his task, he returns from whence he came.

8. Conclusion

I began this chapter by arguing that *Karunamayudu* is a hybrid of primarily Christian and Hindu perceptions of Jesus. In my view, it is the particular set of hybridities that shaped its production that sets it apart as an Indian film, not simply its geographic place of origin. Its combination of visual motifs and allusions to both Christian and Hindu traditions, in turn, invites a non-sectarian devotion to Jesus. Its subversive attacks on institutional religion and the emphasis it places on direct encounters with Jesus as God reflect the impulse of the *bhakti* traditions of Indian spirituality. At the

¹⁰¹ *Karunamayudu* was not the first movie of Jesus' whole life to be produced in India. I have been told of an older film, *Mulla Kireetam* ('Crown of Thorns', c. 1960s). I also have in my possession *Jesus* (1973), directed by P.A. Thomas.

same time, its content reflects aspects of the cinematic environment in which it was produced. Its compassionate protagonist stands in stark contrast to the angry heroes of Indian cinema in the 1970s, as well as the revolutionary movements that, like Barabbas and his band in the movie, continued to rattle the saber of regionalism. From a theological perspective, *Karunamayudu* mutes the exclusivity of Christ espoused by Christian creeds such that no single religious tradition can lay claim to the film as its own. On the one hand, this hybridity in the film makes it accessible to adherents of multiple traditions. As the next two chapters demonstrate, it also makes the film open to various appropriations by representatives of multiple traditions.

CHAPTER SIX

The Distribution and Exhibition of *Karunamayudu*

1. Introduction

In the previous three chapters I reviewed the details of *Karunamayudu*'s production history, context, and content. I also discussed, where possible, the influence of religious or theological traditions on that history. Now I turn to consider the film's distribution and exhibition history. In the first section of this chapter I recount the film's transition from commercial to non-commercial cinema and discuss its significance for the man who has been a primary catalyst in its widespread distribution in India. Drawing on a limited ethnographic study, semi-structured interviews, and feedback from a survey of over three hundred of the film's recent exhibitors. I then discuss its significance for a number of people who continue to screen the film throughout India.

2. From commercial to non-commercial cinema

Unlike John Heyman's *Jesus* (1979), which was first released in North America by Warner Bros., *Karunamayudu* was not made for the purpose of Christian evangelism.¹ Although the Roman Catholic Church became involved in its production early on, the film was meant for commercial distribution and geared for

¹ R. S. Sugirtharajah, 'Indian Cowboy, Hindu Christ', *One World* 49 (1979). On the background of Heyman's *Jesus* (1979), John Dart, 'The Making of Jesus: An Evangelist and an Unhappy Producer', *Christian Century* 118, no. 18 (2001); Paul Eshleman, *I Just Saw Jesus* (Arrowhead Springs, CA: The Jesus Project, 1985).

the 'front benches' of India's film-houses.² Like all commercial movies, it had to first pass the local censor board before its release on 21 December, 1978.³

Again, in contrast to Heyman's film, *Karunamayudu* was a box-office hit, generating sufficient income for its producer Vijay Chander to pay off debts and release additional language versions of the film.⁴ Chander's account of *Karunamayudu*'s initial reception provides a glimpse of early responses to the movie:

The first copy arrived and there was no buyer. I managed to make the movie in Telugu, Tamil and Malayalam versions, facing all the odds. At last, some buyers came forward and released the movie on December 21, 1978. All theatres were clean empty. The situation carried on till December 25, [*sic*] Christmas Day. The next dawn, on December 26, brought the blissful spin of fate bringing blessings of Jesus. From that day on, not a single seat was left unfilled for minimum 100 days. The Indian cinema industry witnessed a memorable occasion then. People came in all possible vehicles and stayed in lodges close to the theatres and camp[ed] for days to view *Karunamayudu*. People waited in long queues for days and cooked their food beside the queues. Does one need any other proof for the blessings of Jesus?⁵

Although Chander's claim that no seats were left unfilled seems a bit of a stretch, both he and Coelho have asserted independently that in some theatres the film ran for up to one hundred days, a considerable achievement in a market where films that last fifty days are considered successful.⁶ In Vijayawada, one of the larger cities in Andhra Pradesh (AP), it reportedly ran for one hundred and fifty days.⁷ Chander's account of viewer responses to the movie places it in prestigious company in the history of Indian cinema. Film scholar J.B.H. Wadia has reported that when *Lankha*

² Fr. Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad.

³ Sri Sathavahana, 'Vijaychander, Born to Perform Jesus'. <http://www.ilovehyd.com/interviews/interviews-vijaychander-born-to-perform-jesus.html> (accessed 12 May 2005).

⁴ Vijay Chander, interview by the author, 16 November 2006, Hyderabad, India.

⁵ Sathavahana.

⁶ Fr. Christopher Coelho, interview by the author, 18 February 2006, Secunderabad, India; Sathavahana.

⁷ 'Hindu's Jesus Film -- a Hit in India', 1. A Dayspring International publication reports that it showed up to 200 days straight but those figures are difficult to corroborate. 'Life of Christ Film Runs Five Shows a Day for 200 Days Straight!', *The Global Villager* (2004): 12.

Dahan (1917), one of D.G. Phalke's first films was released, villagers flocked to Bombay

to have *darshan* of their beloved God, the Lord Rama. The roadside was blocked with the caravan of bullock carts. Many of the villagers had stayed overnight in their improvised dwellings just to see the film again the next day.⁸

Soon after *Karunamayudu*'s release, a Catholic magazine attributed *Karunamayudu*'s positive reception to three factors: the popularity of cinema in India, a general openness on the part of Indians to 'religious ideas', and the film's status as a Hindu production. The latter claim was especially important to the Church, since it prevented the film from being 'branded as a disguised plea for conversion'.⁹ The release of *Karunamayudu* in a number of South Indian languages may also have attributed to its success, not to mention its popularity among Christians in AP. I spoke with two people unconnected to the film's production that saw the film when first released in cinemas and both noted that numerous Christians went to see the movie.¹⁰

Although the film was not made for Christian evangelism, its positive reception was a factor in its subsequent appropriation for that purpose. In February of 1979, while the film was still drawing crowds, its future took an unexpected turn with the arrival on South Indian soil of a North American evangelical by the name of John Gilman. Gilman had recently left his post as programming director for Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) and knew nothing about *Karunamayudu* before arriving in India. For a number of reasons, however, the film quickly became a pivotal factor in his life. Given that the film's subsequent distribution and exhibition history over the last thirty years is due largely to Gilman's

⁸ J.B.H. Wadia, 'The Indian Silent Film', in T. Ramachandran, ed., *70 Years of Indian Cinema (1913-1983)* (Bombay: 1985), 24; quoted in Christopher Pinney, *'Photos of the Gods': The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 73. The concept of *darshan* is critical to a discussion of *Karunamayudu*'s reception and will be taken up in greater detail in the following chapter. B.M. Malhotra, 'Dadasheb Phalke: The Father of Indian Cinema', *India Perspectives* March (2004).

⁹ 'India', 142.

¹⁰ 'Rev. MK', interview by the author, 06 Dec 2006, Bangalore, India; 'Bishop J', interview by the author, 21 January 2006, Tanuku, India. Christians' attendance at the film is noteworthy since for many Christians in India, cinema-attendance is still off-limits even if television or DVD consumption is not. See Sham P. Thomas and Jolyon Mitchell, 'Understanding Television and Christianity in Marthoma Homes, South India', *Studies in World Christianity* 11, no. 1 (2005): 29-48.

efforts, his relationship to the film will receive the most attention in the following account.¹¹

3. The distribution and exhibition of *Karunamayudu*

John Gilman's devotion to the distribution and exhibition of *Karunamayudu* is noteworthy when one considers that he had nothing to do with its production or initial release, cannot speak with fluency any of the fourteen languages in which it has subsequently been released, and realizes no financial profit from its distribution. I suggest, instead, that his commitment to the film derives from a tangle of premises about the relationship between media and divine revelation, and the sense of vocational affirmation that accompanied his discovery of *Karunamayudu*. I begin this section by recounting briefly Gilman's first encounter with *Karunamayudu*. Then I review the strategies that he developed for distributing and exhibiting the film. Next I identify and discuss the assumptions and motivations that have inspired Gilman over the last thirty years. Finally, I discuss the film's significance for a select group of recent exhibitors. My objective throughout is to identify and discuss the various religions and theological traditions that have shaped the distribution and exhibition history of *Karunamayudu*.

3.1 What John Gilman saw in *Karunamayudu*

John Gilman's involvement with *Karunamayudu* may have begun in February 1979, but his interest in communicating the Gospel of Christ in India can be traced to a missionary conference after which, at the age of twelve, he informed some friends that one day he would go to India.¹² That early conviction was reinforced by a

¹¹ That said, further attention needs to be given to the role that the Roman Catholic Church has played in its distribution history. Fr. Raymond Ambroise, who was Executive Director of Amruthavani at the time of its development, reports that he was personally involved in securing funds to produce prints for the film's general release as well as for use by local bishops. He claims that Amruthavani was also responsible for investing in a new negative of the film to ensure that it would be preserved for posterity. Fr. Raymond Ambroise, email to the author, 11 April 2008.

¹² Ibid., 22, 13.

number of subsequent events, two of which Gilman himself has highlighted as especially formative.¹³

In 1966 Gilman joined Pat Roberson's Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN), but soon left for what would be an eight-month stint as a pastor at a local Church. During that period, in April of 1968, Gilman found himself back at CBN on an errand, where he met with a visiting Christian pastor to pray for 'more of the Lord'.¹⁴ Desperate for greater spiritual vitality in his own life, Gilman claims to have been on the brink of jettisoning his Christian faith.¹⁵ When the pastor he was praying with left the room, Gilman claims he saw a vision appear on the blank white wall in front of him, consisting of scenes from Jesus' life ranging from his birth to his ascension.¹⁶ During the crucifixion scene, he reportedly heard the Holy Spirit telling him, 'Don't be afraid. Only I would show you this . . . You're seeing only one grain of sand of My holiness in a mighty ocean'.¹⁷ In the moments following he felt so aware of God's presence, he was convinced that he could have received a direct answer to any question that he posed. All he could muster, however, was: 'What will I be doing in ten years?' Although no direct answer was forthcoming, he soon resigned from his church post and returned to CBN, his spiritual thirst satiated.¹⁸

Approximately two years later, while on a visit to Haiti, he patronized a local cinema and was appalled by the 'gratuitous violence and sex that flooded the screen'; worse yet, it was an American film.¹⁹ Full of remorse that his predominantly Christian nation was exporting such trash, he vowed to God that he would return someday and 'fill that screen with the message of Jesus and His love'.²⁰ In that

¹³ For details, see John Gilman, *They're Killing an Innocent Man*, Abridged ed. (USA: Dayspring International, 2001), 15, 25-27.

¹⁴ In a personal interview he identified this person as John Osteen, former pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas. John Gilman, e-mail to the author, 29 April 2008.

¹⁵ John Gilman, interview by the author, 04 July 2005, Three Bridges, London, UK.

¹⁶ Although he does not recall that the characters represented a particular nationality, he is quite certain they were not white. John Gilman, interview by the author, 04 July 2005, Three Bridges, London, UK. See also Gilman, 15-16.

¹⁷ Ibid., 24. *Daya Sagar*, the Hindi title for *Karunamayudu*, means 'Ocean of Mercy'.

¹⁸ John Gilman, interview by the author, 04 July 2005, Three Bridges, London, UK.

¹⁹ Gilman, 26-27.

²⁰ Ibid., 26. I do not know if he has since returned to Haiti.

moment he became convinced that the remainder of his life would be committed to the task of "'visualizing" the gospel for local cultures'.²¹

Although CBN continued to expand Gilman grew increasingly disillusioned with television's potential for spreading the good news of Jesus Christ around the world. Not only did CBN programming barely register in nationwide daytime television ratings, Gilman concluded that its audience was primarily white and Christian and therefore its content would not be well received overseas. The more he prayed and read about other cultures, the more convinced he became that the gospel should 'live and grow in the soil of [a] culture and manifest itself in whatever way it was supposed to'. Again, he believed he heard God speaking to him and saying, 'I want you to do what I did when I was on earth. I spoke to the people in parables and stories. You do the same'.²² It was a divine charge that he felt unable to ignore. As he put it,

It was as if the President of the United States had said, 'Come to Washington, I've got something for you to do. And here it is. Go do it. And if you don't, you know, I don't have to tell you the consequences'. Well, it was so powerful in my life, I knew, this is what I have to do'.²³

Recognizing that his calling to cinema would never complement CBN's commitment to television, Gilman eventually resigned. On the same day he met an Indian man who had regularly shown and narrated Cecil B. DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1927) in India and encouraged Gilman to pursue his dream of making a movie of Jesus' life.²⁴ Despite this affirmation and a request from another Indian acquaintance by the name of Ernest Komananpalli to produce programming in India, however, he first spent some time pitching projects in Hollywood. Finally, at his wife's insistence he boarded a plane for India convinced that God would honour his efforts to fulfill Komananpalli's request by showing him what to do next. The project took him to the village of Amalapuram, AP, where he was surprised to discover a billboard for *Karunamayudu* (Fig. 5) and immediately arranged to see the film in the local cinema.

²¹ Ibid., 2001, 27. Like D.G. Phalke, the father of Indian cinema, Gilman attributed a movie representing values alien to his own religious ideals with motivating his commitment to cinema. Cf. 'D.G. Phalke; Dossier; Swadeshi Moving Pictures,' *Continuum* 2, no. 1 (1988-89).

²² John Gilman, interview by the author, 04 July 2005, Three Bridges, London, UK.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.



Fig. 5 - John Gilman with hoarding of *Karunamayudu*, c. 1979. Note that the title is written in Telugu, not Hindi. One can also observe in this image an example of the outdoor environments in which the film is commonly screened. Used by permission of John Gilman.

As
Karunamayudu
 began to flicker on
 screen, Gilman felt a
 pang of betrayal.
 Was not *he* supposed
 to make a movie
 about Jesus in India?
 Furthermore, like Fr
 Christopher Coelho,
 he was sceptical
 about how the story
 of Christ would be
 treated by Indian
 filmmakers. Would

Jesus be portrayed as just another god in the Hindu pantheon? His concerns, however, were quickly diffused by what he perceived to be the film's relative faithfulness to the Gospel accounts. Furthermore, the way viewers around him interacted with the film and responded positively to Jesus—he reports that they cried out, 'Why are they killing an innocent man?'—convinced him that its producers had managed to visualize the good news of Jesus for the local culture.²⁵ It also occurred to him that he had seen this film nearly ten years earlier on the office wall at CBN, and he concluded quickly that his calling was to distribute *Karunamayudu* rather than make his own movie of Jesus' life. Within days he had contacted Vijay Chander and negotiated the rights to make an unlimited number of 16mm copies of the film, at cost, for free exhibition throughout India. In the autumn of 1979 he returned to the village of Amalapuram for the first free screening of *Karunamayudu*. A more detailed autobiographical account of Gilman's history with the film can be found elsewhere.²⁶ Suffice to say, *Karunamayudu* offered him the means to fulfill his commitment to visualizing the gospel of Jesus for local cultures, beginning in India,

²⁵ Based on Gilman's comments about the film's capacity to communicate the meaning of vicarious atonement (see p. 167), I surmise that the visceral response of viewers, especially their reported chanting about Jesus' innocence, convinced Gilman of its capacity to illustrate the notion of Jesus' death in terms of the doctrine of substitutionary atonement.

²⁶ Gilman.

the land to which he had felt drawn as a boy. In that respect, the film reinforced his sense of vocation.

3.2 Showing *Karunamayudu*: strategies for distribution and exhibition

Not long after he secured the rights from Chander to screen *Karunamayudu* freely throughout India, Gilman initiated his strategy for exhibiting the film throughout India, a method that has remained virtually unchanged for three decades.²⁷ Itinerant teams of four were equipped with 'a van, a movie projector, a screen, a portable generator, a loudspeaker, and a copy of the film'.²⁸ Because of his stated concern for cultural relevance, Gilman insisted that team members be Indian Christians, at least one of which would be a 'national pastor, evangelist or lay person'.²⁹ This precaution was a deliberate move to prevent the screening of the film from association with foreign missionaries.³⁰ Screenings would be announced publicly in a village in the morning using the loudspeaker and van. At every showing, an invitation would be given to 'accept Christ', and, if necessary, a Church would be started for new believers.³¹

Gilman's film teams are reminiscent of Bible colporteurs that played a role in the American Tract Society's distribution of Christian literature in America, not to mention a method of film distribution common to Indian cinema history.³² As early as 1904, an enterprising Tamil railway draughtsman in South India by the name of Samykannu Vincent purchased a projector and a short-reeler of the *Life of Jesus*

²⁷ John Gilman, interview by the author, 04 July 2005, Three Bridges, London, UK.

²⁸ Gilman, 2001, 32.

²⁹ Ibid., 43.

³⁰ Ibid. See this chapter, fn. 28.

³¹ Gilman, 2001, 33. A little-known fact is that between the time Gilman acquired permission from Chander to distribute the film and the first free screening in the autumn of 1979, Gilman discussed the possibility of showing *Karunamayudu* under the auspices of Campus Crusade for Christ International (CCCI). With their own (Heyman's) *Jesus* in production, however, Bill Bright, then president of CCCI, declined, but supported Gilman financially while DI was being established. John Gilman, interview by the author, 04 July 2005, Three Bridges, London, UK.

³² Notes from the minutes of the American Tract Society refer to culporters as itinerant 'book-peddlers' with an ambiguous status somewhere between that of the lay person and the ordained minister. *Forty-First Annual Report of the American Tract Society* (Boston, MA: American Tract Society, 1855), 32-34. For an account of an itinerant film exhibitor, see Gregory A. Waller, 'Robert Southard and the History of Traveling Film Exhibition' *Film Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2003-2004).

Christ from the Frenchman E.A. DuPont and began showing films wherever he could.³³ Likewise, D.G. Phalke, the 'father of Indian cinema' transported his first films by oxcart throughout rural India;³⁴ his method of distribution endures today in the form of India's touring cinemas.³⁵

What began as a loose affiliation of four teams quickly grew into a more formal distribution network and Gilman eventually founded DI to give direction to his burgeoning enterprise.³⁶ In the early years, Gilman collaborated with the organization Arunodaya (Telugu for 'dawning'), now the media branch for Manna Ministries headed by Ernest Komanapalli.³⁷ Arunodaya reportedly oversaw more than 24 teams that received monthly support through DI, but Gilman also encouraged collaborative arrangements with other ministries.³⁸ He granted one group up to 60 prints of the film, but with no projectors. Gilman estimates that approximately 700-800 16mm copies of the film were produced for distribution. On average, each print lasted for approximately three hundred showings, with the record reportedly being 1200.³⁹

With the advent of VHS technology, Gilman instituted a new initiative in which VHS copies of the film could be purchased at subsidized rates and then marked up for resale. This strategy served the dual function of increasing the film's exposure and providing a supplementary income especially for Christian pastors. Gilman has estimated that 50,000 copies of the film were distributed in this way.⁴⁰ When Arunodaya was taken to court on charges that showing the film was not

³³ Umsima Shafiq, 'Forgotten Pioneer of Tamil Cinema', *Gulf Times Features*, 20 January 2008, 8. It would appear from this account that Vincent's objectives were commercial, not evangelistic.

³⁴ 'D.G. Phalke; Dossier; Swadeshi Moving Pictuers', *Continuum* 2, no. 1 (1988-89).

³⁵ On India's transient cinemas, see Jonathan Torgovnik, *Bollywood Dreams: An Exploration of the Motion Picture Industry and Its Culture in India* (London; New York: Phaidon, 2003).

³⁶ See www.dayspringinternational.org

³⁷ See www.manna7.org for more information. Komanapalli was the man who accompanied Gilman to his first screening of *Karunamayudu* in India. Arunodaya's participation in the distribution of *Karunamayudu* was part of a larger enterprise; the ministry also gave leadership to a number of other Christian ministries, including a network of Churches, a Bible school and orphanages. John Gilman, Telephone interview by the author, 17 March 2008, Edinburgh, Scotland.

³⁸ Manna Ministries reports having up to 24 teams. <http://www.manna7.org/arunodaya.htm>. Accessed 01 May, 2008. In a telephone interview by the author on 17 Mar 2008, John Gilman estimated 24-50 teams.

³⁹ John Gilman, Telephone interview by the author, 17 March 2008, Edinburgh, Scotland.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

considered charity work and should therefore be taxed, Gilman formed Dayspring Enterprises (DE) as an alternative distribution arm in India. Eventually charges against Arunodaya were dropped, but c. 1997, DE developed a collaborative relationship with Operation Mobilization (OM) for exhibiting the film that remains operative today.⁴¹

According to statistics on DI's website, at the time of writing the film had been shown in more than 232,000 Indian villages to over 131 million people in the last thirty years. Gilman claims that 275 teams show the film regularly throughout India under the auspices of DE, with plans to add 50 more teams in 2008 as well as stream the film online.⁴² Through the support of DI, *Karunamayudu* has also been broadcast regularly on national and regional television networks including Doordarshan and Gemini, and versions of the film are available in VCD format from a variety of online vendors and local video stores.⁴³ Thus, thanks to myriad distribution networks, *Karunamayudu* has arguably become one of the best-known movies of Jesus' life in India since its release in 1978.

It is difficult to say how many versions of *Karunamayudu* have circulated over the years. In the days of 16mm prints, exhibitors were prone to edit their versions of the film according to their own moral scruples or the perceived tastes of potential audiences; often the two 'cabaret' dances from the original were the first to hit the cutting room floor.⁴⁴ Even the remastered DVD currently used by DE / OM ministry teams does not have all the original scenes, and according to John Gilman, select language versions of the film in DVD format have been edited to accommodate regional sensitivities.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Below I discuss briefly my findings about how some of these team members perceive *Karunamayudu*.

⁴² The above summary is derived from the following sources: John Gilman, Telephone interview by the author, 17 March 2008, Edinburgh, Scotland; John Gilman, interview by the author, 04 July 2005, Three Bridges, London, UK. I will discuss Gilman's distribution strategy in greater detail below.

⁴³ I found the film for sale in VCD format at Volga Video outlets in South India. For online purchases see www.anytamil.com

⁴⁴ For a more detailed list and discussion of excised scenes, see chapter 5, n.5.

⁴⁵ He did not specify the details of those sensitivities. The film is currently available in 14 languages, and Gilman claims that efforts were initiated to translate it into Arabic.: John Gilman, Telephone interview by the author, 17 March 2008, Edinburgh, Scotland. I have yet to determine precisely what the regional differences are to which Gilman refers.

3.3 Showing *Karunamayudu*: assumptions and motivations

In contrast to most discussions of film distribution and exhibition, this study does not turn on the analysis of commercial distribution networks, economic policies, distributor-exhibitor relations, or the history of commercial film distribution, whether in the West or in India.⁴⁶ The dynamics of *Karunamayudu*'s distribution and exhibition involve different networks of exchange.

Encounters between itinerant exhibitors and viewers of *Karunamayudu* are typically non-commercial and often couched in discourses that have little relationship to box-office outcomes, film reviews, or customer driven rating systems.

⁴⁷ Instead, those exchanges tend to involve prayer, discussions about Jesus, the distribution of Christian literature, and occasionally violent encounters between exhibitors and those who oppose the use of *Karunamayudu* in the cause of Christian evangelism.⁴⁸ Furthermore, as I will demonstrate in the subsequent chapter, the spaces in which *Karunamayudu* has been shown over the decades are a far cry from the dream palaces, drive-ins, or multi-plexes that have dominated Western scholarship on film exhibition. Each of the three public screenings of *Karunamayudu* I attended in India occurred at night in the open air where viewers—not to mention the odd bovine—could come and go as they pleased.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ For detailed analyses of commercial film exhibition in South India, however, see the work of Stephen Hughes. Stephen P. Hughes, 'Policing Silent Film Exhibition in Colonial South India', in *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*, ed. Ravi S. Vasudevan (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002); Hughes, 'Mythologicals and Modernity: Contesting Silent Cinema in South India'. See, for example, Gregory A. Waller, *Moviegoing in America: A Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002).

⁴⁷ Apart from a brief run in theatres in North India in the late 1980s in which costs were barely recouped, *Karunamayudu* has not been commercially distributed or exhibited by Gilman or Dayspring International. That said, it is for sale in a variety of commercial contexts in South India, due in part to piracy, but also perhaps, due to earlier distribution agreements. John Gilman, telephone interview by the author, 17 March 2008, Edinburgh, Scotland.

⁴⁸ Granted, the need to report results from screenings of the film has some parallels with recording data significant to commercial enterprises.

⁴⁹ Perhaps more appropriate to this discussion are the anthropologically inflected studies of film distribution and exhibition in non-Western contexts. I think particularly here of works such as: Sara Dickey, *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Brian Larkin, 'Bandiri Music, Globalisation and Urban Experience in Nigeria', in *Bollywood: Popular Indian Cinema through a Transnational Lens*, ed. Raminder Kaur and Ajay J. Sinha (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2005); Philip Lutgendorf, 'Is There an Indian Way of Filmmaking?', *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 10, no. 3 (2006); Birgit Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe in Ghana* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1999).

Given that Gilman's interest in *Karunamayudu* has not been profit driven, I suggest that his motivation for its distribution and exhibition in India must be located elsewhere, and involve two questions that are central to this research project: What is Gilman's understanding of the relationship between film, religion, and theology? How has that understanding shaped his approach to the distribution and exhibition of *Karunamayudu*? In the following section, therefore, I examine three major assumptions that have shaped Gilman's commitment to the distribution and exhibition of *Karunamayudu*.

3.3.1 Gilman's foundational assumptions

Based on personal interviews with Gilman, an overview of his account of the film, and my observation of his approach to the film's distribution and exhibition, I have concluded that his understanding of film, religion, and theology revolves around three primary assumptions.

First, he is convinced that divine revelation is best communicated visually. In his own words:

I believe in the mass media, the motion picture first, as . . . [an] affective medium of communication . . . Because I still believe that [the] visual is the most powerful tool for revelation.⁵⁰

The efficacy of *Karunamayudu* as a medium of revelation is, according to Gilman's rationale, linked to a conflation of the film and the biblical text, not to mention Christ himself. 'In an intimate setting', he has argued, the living Word comes off that screen directly into hearts and minds.⁵¹

To explain his rationale for such a conflation of image and word, Gilman has appealed to biblical texts such as Revelation 1:2, in which the Apostle John speaks about *seeing* the voice that spoke to him, as well as other symbols and visual means of divine revelation. Additional scriptural examples to which Gilman has turned to

⁵⁰ Ibid. It is difficult to distinguish from the recording of this statement whether Gilman said 'affective' or 'effective'; nevertheless, since he endorses elsewhere the emotional power of *Karunamayudu*, I suggest that he meant 'effective'.

⁵¹ John Gilman, 'Sharing Christ's Hope: One Heart at a Time', *Global Villager* (2004), 2.

illustrate his faith in media include the tablets of stone on which the ten commandments were etched, the tabernacle in the wilderness, the rending of the veil following Jesus' death, and finally, the Incarnation itself.⁵² By focusing on the written word, Gilman has argued, Christians have lost touch with the potential of visual media, especially cinema, to 'communicate a wider range of emotions and persuasion'.⁵³ 'That is why', in his view, 'enabling people to "see" the message of the cross has such a life-transforming impact. The key is visualization'.⁵⁴

His conviction about the supremacy of visual media for communicating divine truth is also based on the conviction that it is easier to explain complex ideas through images and stories than through reading, preaching, or teaching. For example, he has suggested that the otherwise complex notion of vicarious suffering is visualized in a single sequence from *Karunamayudu* in which Barabbas recognizes that Jesus has died in his place and runs to the cross, crying, 'Lord!' 'Lord!'.⁵⁵ Elsewhere he has claimed that viewers can 'digest more gospel' from the screen in under three hours than would be possible from a year's worth of preaching.⁵⁶ As a 'moving photograph of some 280,000 frames', he has argued, *Karunamayudu* 'dramatically and effectively presents the love and power of the Lord Jesus Christ'.⁵⁷

Gilman's preference for the visual is reflected in the name of his organization, Dayspring International, a title purportedly derived from a reference to Christ as the rising sun in Luke 1:76b-79.⁵⁸ Yet, for Gilman, the name is also a reference to cinematic technology; the 'powerful light of a projector on a screen shining into the darkened hearts of villagers everywhere'.⁵⁹ It is sometimes difficult to tell from Gilman's claims where he thinks Christ leaves off and the film begins:

⁵² Gilman, 68.

⁵³ Ibid., 69.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 67.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 70.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 67.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 75.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 33. The verses are taken from the song of Zechariah after the birth of his son who became known as John the Baptist.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 33. This conflation of screen and viewer, of Christ and technology deserves a theological analysis of its own. Gilman's terminology here also suggests that one's view of media and its effects is closely linked to one's understanding of people and how they engage with media.

For two hours plus they have seen the Savior and their memories are engraved with images of His death, burial and resurrection . . . The Holy Spirit is present every time the film rolls. And as the light of the projector comes on, it is like the light of Christ piercing dark souls.⁶⁰

When strung together in close succession, the above quotes affirm Gilman's faith in the efficacious potential of cinema. At the same time, however, they reveal an implicit assertion that viewers are virtually incapable of resisting the power of visual media.⁶¹

A second assumption of Gilman's is tied closely to the first; namely, that the good news of Jesus Christ must be visualized specifically for local cultures. Two key concepts are at stake in this assumption: the nature of the Gospel, and the significance of culture. For Gilman, the essence of the Christian Gospel is contained in the account of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection. Furthermore, although Gilman has acknowledged the inflections of Roman Catholicism and Hindu mythology in the film's history and content, those aspects of the film can, in his view, be overlooked because they do not detract from its representation of the core events of the Gospel message.⁶²

That said, Gilman is emphatic that the presentation of the Gospel should be culturally relevant. When it comes to sharing the good news of Jesus, he told me, culture is 'everything', because 'the culture we grow up in determines our perception and understanding of everything around us'.⁶³ In other words, he has argued, the blue-eyed Jesus of North America does not belong in India; nor is the Jesus of *Karunamayudu* particularly appropriate for North America.⁶⁴ Jesus' embodiment may look different from culture to culture even if the details of his story remain the same. He also recognizes that while Westerners may struggle to reconcile the notion of Jesus as both God and man, that concept is not alien to India.⁶⁵ At the same time, Gilman has been careful to emphasize that Jesus is not a slave to any given culture.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 3.

⁶¹ I find it difficult to understand how a person who has spent so much time in a media environment and in multiple cultures can both maintain and advocate such a simplistic understanding of the relationship between image and text.

⁶² John Gilman, interview by the author, 04 July 2005, Three Bridges, London, UK

⁶³ 'What's Cultural Relevance Got to Do with It?', *The Global Villager* (2004), 3.

⁶⁴ John Gilman, interview by the author, 04 July 2005, Three Bridges, London, UK.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

For him, Jesus is 'the revelation of the invisible' and 'the Savior of all cultures', neither 'linear in thinking' nor 'cyclical', but God in flesh'.⁶⁶ Similarly, Jesus is not a slave to any given theological tradition. Ultimately, what matters to Gilman is that the film portrays the events at the core of the Christian Gospel, as he understands it. Furthermore, his enthusiasm for the film is based on its history of encouraging viewers to place their faith in Christ.

Therein lies a third foundational assumption in Gilman's understanding of the relationship between film, religion, and theology; visual media are instruments, or tools, for effecting change. It is an assumption that he has expressed in a number of ways. In his view, Jesus' command to 'make disciples of all nations' (Matt. 28:19-20) can be executed most efficiently through the use of films like *Karunamayudu*. 'Indigenous film evangelism', he has argued, is 'one of the shortest routes to planting a Church in a targeted population'.⁶⁷ Elsewhere he has asserted that *Karunamayudu* is 'the single most powerful tool for sharing the love of Christ in India's history';⁶⁸ indeed it 'has been used to plant thousands of churches in India'.⁶⁹

An instrumentalist view of media could not be stated more baldly than Gilman's own rationale for showing *Karunamayudu*: 'It is simple, it works, and new believers are often baptized the very next day'.⁷⁰ Not only is the film effective and persuasive, Gilman argues, it is 'always consistent, never tired or forgetful, always dramatic, in color, and with music'.⁷¹ Furthermore, it can capture the attention of viewers for more than two hours. To summarize, Gilman's faith in the potential of cinema for visualizing theological truth is informed by an instrumentalist understanding of media.

The three basic assumptions in Gilman's understanding of film's relationship to religion and theology are summed up in the following statement:

Maybe in the Judgment there will be a hundred or a thousand that were told to do such a project and they did not do it. And a Hindu

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ 'Life of Christ Film Runs Five Shows a Day for 200 Days Straight!'.
⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ By 'it works' he means that the showing of the film often inspires people to know more about Jesus, why he died, and how he can redeem them. Ibid., 70.

⁷² Ibid., 78. The implicit assertion here is that the film is more reliable and predictable than people are.

film-maker and a Catholic media ministry, and a backward American . . . who doesn't have that much education in broadcasting or anything else, we've shown this movie to a hundred million people face-to-face. And so, let the others throw the stone . . . We've got lives that are transformed, so the proof's there.⁷²

In other words, his primary justification for appropriating *Karunamayudu* in the cause of Christian evangelism is that it 'works'. The transformed lives of viewers who have encountered the film function for him as a divine endorsement of the film as well as his appropriation of it.⁷³ Furthermore, he seems to believe that one of the reasons it 'works' is because God inspired it.⁷⁴

In the paragraphs above I have attempted to summarize three of Gilman's primary assumptions about film's relationship to religion and theology that have informed his use of *Karunamayudu* as an evangelistic tool in India. In the next section I interrogate those assumptions and then discuss how some of the film's Indian exhibitors have perceived it.

3.3.2 Gilman's assumptions: a review

Gilman's enthusiasm for film's capacity to communicate theological truth is common to the literature on film and theology. Neil Hurley, a pioneering contributor to that conversation once argued that 'movies are for the masses what theology is for an elite'.⁷⁵

The major problem with Gilman's assumptions, however, is that they are simplistic, if not at times conflicting. One need not be an academic theologian to

⁷² John Gilman, interview by the author, 04 July 2005, Three Bridges, London, UK.

⁷³ Although he does not specify precisely the nature of that transformation, it is likely that he has in mind some form of conversion to Christian faith. The notion that the obedience of those involved with the film somehow plays a part in its efficacy in transforming lives is not unlike Fr Christopher Coelho's suggestion that his perseverance in the production of the film may also have contributed—almost meritoriously—to its positive reception among viewers. Christopher Coelho, 'How Hindus Filmed the Life of Christ,' *Action*, January 1980: 19. It is curious, given Gilman's affiliations with Pentecostal Christianity through CBN, how seldom he attributes agency to the Holy Spirit or exhibitors when lauding the film's efficacy.

⁷⁴ Gilman accepted at face value Chander's claim that Jesus had pushed him to make the film. In response, Gilman told Chander that Jesus was pushing him to distribute it. John Gilman, interview by the author, 04 July 2005, Three Bridges, London, UK.

⁷⁵ Neil P. Hurley, *Theology Through Film* (New York; London: Harper & Row, 1970), ix.

recognize that behind Gilman's assertion about the superiority of the visual as a means of communicating divine truth is a selective use of biblical texts. That the visual dimension has played a significant role in biblical accounts of revelation is uncontested. Whether one adopts a literal or a metaphorical interpretation of the creation account in Genesis, however, it is impossible to ignore that God is described as having *spoken* the world into being (Gen 1:1). Furthermore, although visible creation is sometimes described in biblical texts as a wordless revelation of the glory and character of God (Ps 19:1; Rom 1:20), the Apostle Paul has also argued that humans either have ignored or been oblivious to such insights (Rom 1:19-22). Jesus himself reportedly described his generation as 'ever seeing, but never perceiving', and at times deliberately concealed his message by couching it in metaphor and parable (Matt 13:13-15). After his resurrection Jesus revealed himself to his doubting disciple Thomas and allowed him to touch the scars in his hands and side. Yet Jesus also praised those who would place their faith in him without access to such visual evidence (Jn.20:29).

Gilman makes no claim to being a theologian, and his enthusiasm for the visual may be read as a counterpoint to the emphasis on the word (written or preached) in Western Christianity, especially among Protestant traditions.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, his enthusiastic claims about the priority of the visual in biblical revelation fail to reflect the nuances of the biblical text itself. Furthermore, if the visual is such a compelling medium of revelation, as well as a superior form of theological pedagogy, one might have expected more people to follow Jesus or be convinced of his deity by virtue of the miracles he performed.

Likewise, Gilman's faith in the power of film to communicate complex theological ideas suggests a lack of critical reflection on the relationship between images and theology. On the one hand, his enthusiasm reflects a long-standing endorsement of images in the Christian Church articulated during the iconoclastic controversy of the seventh and eighth centuries. At that time St. John of Damascus argued in favour of icons on the premise that 'What a book is to the literate, an image is to the illiterate'.⁷⁷ He even suggested that all matter should be honoured 'not as

⁷⁶ For a response to this bias as it pertains to film, religion, and theology, see Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 74-78.

⁷⁷ St John the Damascene, *On Holy Images, Followed by Three Sermons on the Assumption*, trans., Mary H. Allies (London: Thomas Baker, 1898), 19.

God, but as a channel of divine strength and grace'.⁷⁸ At the same time, however, he demonstrated that God's relationship to image and theology is complicated by observing that the same God who prohibited the creation and worship of idolatrous images (Ex 20:2) also instructed that images be made for Solomon's temple (1 Kgs 6:18-35).⁷⁹ St John of Damascene's central argument for using images in Christian worship and instruction was that in becoming flesh, Jesus as God opened himself to representation.⁸⁰ Yet despite his endorsement of images as aids for Christian worship and instruction, St. John of Damascene took pains to note that images are at best a 'dark glass' that can only 'remind us *faintly* of God'.⁸¹ Furthermore, it is noteworthy that representatives of the Eastern Orthodox Church, whose iconographic traditions derive their logic from St. John's arguments, resist dramatizations of Jesus' life as 'spiritually, theologically and pedagogically problematic'.⁸² The reason, according to Orthodox theologian David Goa, is that 'the text is too important for drama, and spiritual romanticism too easily offers a simulacrum, a shadowy likeness and a deceptive substitute'.⁸³ Against such a nuanced tradition, Gilman's claims about the efficacy of visual media seem, at best, hyperbolic.

It should be noted, however, that Gilman's claims about the interchangeable relationship between images and theological ideas reflect an assumption that art historian and critic David Morgan has observed more broadly in Protestant traditions, that 'the word can be translated to other media without compromising its accuracy and authority'.⁸⁴ Although the focus of this study is on *Karunamayudu*, Gilman is not alone among film evangelists in his propensity to conflate film and sacred text. Paul Eshleman, the former director of CCCI's 'Jesus film' project, once claimed that his organization's edited version of John Krish and Peter Sykes' *Jesus* (1979) is 'as

⁷⁸ Ibid., 73.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 88.

⁸⁰ St John the Damascene, *On Holy Images*, 5, 6.

⁸¹ Ibid., 59, 12. Italics mine.

⁸² David Goa, 'The Passion, Classical Art and Re-Presentation', in *Jesus and Mel Gibson's the Passion of the Christ: The Film, the Gospels and the Claims of History*, ed. Kathleen E. Corley and Robert L. Webb (London: Continuum, 2004), 159.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ David Morgan, 'Protestant Visual Piety and the Aesthetics of American Mass Culture', in *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture*, ed. Jolyon Mitchell and Sophia Marriage (London: T & T, 2003), 108.

timeless as Scripture itself, for that is what it is'.⁸⁵ Eshleman made the parallel even more explicit by claiming that CCCI's *Jesus* film 'evangelizes, edifies, teaches and makes disciples'; a direct allusion to 2 Tim. 3:16, and a conflation of film and the biblical text.⁸⁶

Finally, Gilman's emphasis on *Karunamayudu* as an evangelistic *tool* and his faith in its ability to transform lives, reflects an instrumentalist—or transmission—theory of media wherein communication is conceived primarily as the transfer of messages. Film critics who adopt such a view tend to evaluate movies on the basis of their content, frowning on those that oppose their own preferred values and endorsing movies that support them.⁸⁷ In a similar vein, Gilman's enthusiasm for the efficacy of *Karunamayudu* reflects Quentin J. Schultze's observation that evangelicals have displayed a 'remarkably uncritical faith in media technology' demonstrated by their tendency 'to see the principal function of the media as evangelism, or proclamation of the gospel'.⁸⁸ Consequently, they have invested heavily in media, 'even though there is very little evidence that mass media evangelism is actually very effective'.⁸⁹

Gilman would likely contest Schultze's claim about the effectiveness of mass media for evangelism, but a cursory review of DI's publications and website suggests that his understanding of *Karunamayudu*'s effects is limited mostly to the ways it facilitates the particular form of evangelism that he and his colleagues advocate. In other words, his understanding of media effects is linked closely to an objective. Little, if any attention has been given in DI publications to the film's other effects; for example, its effects on those who do not respond to the film in the ways that its exhibitors would hope. Put differently, he does not appear concerned with understanding the effects of the film, except as they pertain to his objectives. More accurately, perhaps, he wants to take advantage of a certain set of effects that he has

⁸⁵ Eshleman, 179.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 180.

⁸⁷ Such a rationale has been integral to Campus Crusade for Christ International's (CCCI) commitment to Jesus film evangelism. Paul Eshleman, former director of the Jesus film project at CCCI, once stated that 'technology can be used . . . to preach truth or tell lies'. Paul Eshleman, *I Just Saw Jesus* (Arrowhead Springs, CA: The Jesus Project, 1985), 178.

⁸⁸ Quentin J. Schultze, 'Evangelicals' Uneasy Alliance with the Media,' in *Religion and Mass Media: Audiences and Adaptations*, ed. Judith Mitchell Buddenbaum and Daniel A. Stout (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996), 69, 63.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 64.

observed the film to have on a large percentage of viewers in order to achieve his evangelistic objectives.

Granted, Gilman has argued for the significance of cultural nuances.⁹⁰ He has affirmed Chander's efforts to portray Jesus as akin to India's holy men, and he has conceded that viewers may identify Jesus as their *guru*, rather than describing him as their Saviour or Messiah.⁹¹ Nevertheless, his statements about the film and the strategies he has employed for distributing and exhibiting *Karunamayudu* betray a restricted understanding of the complex relationship between media and culture. His claims about the cultural relevance of the film—its all-Indian cast, Indian music, melodramatic overtones—evoke a static view of Indian culture that may be accessible to financial supporters of his efforts in the West but runs the risk of reducing Indian culture to yet another neutral conduit for the transmission of the Gospel message.

There is another danger associated with an instrumental understanding of media, namely the temptation to perceive other human beings as *tabula rasae*, capable of being inscribed by the powerful influence of media.⁹² Gilman's terminology in the above quotes about the Word coming *directly* into human hearts or the film '*piercing* dark souls' reflects such a view.⁹³ That 'visual representations can be used to form character, to develop virtues and to shape practice' is not in question.⁹⁴ Yet as David Morley and Stuart Hall demonstrated nearly two decades ago, people interpret and appropriate media messages according to a variety of factors including, but not limited to, gender, class, and degrees of media literacy.⁹⁵ Whether he realizes it or not, Gilman's claims about the power of *Karunamayudu* to influence people toward faith in Christ has strong propagandist overtones that can

⁹⁰ 'What's Cultural Relevance Got to Do with It?'

⁹¹ John Gilman, interview by the author, 04 July 2005, Three Bridges, London, UK.

⁹² This is a foundational premise behind concerns about the effects of media, especially the effects of media violence. For alternative views, see Martin Barker, 'The Newson Report: A Case Study in 'Common Sense', in *The Audience Studies Reader*, ed. Will Brooker and Deborah Jermyn (London: Routledge, 2003).

⁹³ Not to mention the simplistic and condescending caricature of all viewers implied by the phrase 'dark souls'.

⁹⁴ Jolyon P. Mitchell, *Media Violence and Christian Ethics*, New Studies in Christian Ethics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 11.

⁹⁵ Stuart Hall, 'Encoding/Decoding,' in *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner (Malden, MA; Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1980); Dave Morley and others, *The Nationwide Television Studies* (London: Routledge, 1999).

sound particularly manipulative when one considers that his target audience consists largely of the illiterate and downtrodden in India's population.⁹⁶

John Ferré, a scholar of media and religion, has argued that 'what people believe about the media has everything to do with how they use them'.⁹⁷ People who consider media to be neutral conduits, he suggests, 'are likely to adopt them early and use them fully.' Alternatively, those who recognize the power of media to influence perception may be more judicious in their appropriation of media products. Those who understand media to be primarily 'social institutions, on the other hand, will negotiate the processes of production, always mindful of the ways people interpret the media they use.'⁹⁸

I suggest, alternatively, that Ferré's assertion ought to be complemented by another: what one believes about people shapes how one uses media. Nevertheless, Ferré's basic insight about the relationship between perceptions of media and their appropriation provides a helpful introduction for a review of Gilman's distribution and exhibition strategy for *Karunamayudu*.

3.4 Showing *Karunamayudu*: assumptions and implications

In chapter 2 I employed James Carey's distinction between a transmission view and a ritual view of communication to introduce two different approaches to Jesus films. I now revisit Carey's model as a framework for explaining Gilman's and Coelho's individual relationships to *Karunamayudu*.⁹⁹ In this section I reflect briefly on the implications of these various perceptions of communication and the cinematic medium for the ways in which people have engaged with the film. To review briefly,

⁹⁶ Gilman is not alone. Consider the following quote regarding Campus Crusade for Christ International's 'JESUS' film, published in the *Lausanne World Pulse*: 'The JESUS Film works among peoples that are not very media-savvy, but not as well in media-rich environments. . . . we should also concentrate on broadening the use of the JESUS Film among World A peoples who are not yet media-savvy and where film is something new and wonderful. There it will be most effective at communicating the gospel'. Justin Long, 'Media Evangelism among the Unreached,' *Lausanne World Pulse*, February 2006.

⁹⁷ John P. Ferré, 'The Media of Popular Piety,' in *Mediating Religion: Conversation in Media, Religion and Culture*, ed. Jolyon Mitchell and Sophia Marriage (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 91.

⁹⁹ James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, Repr. ed., Media and Popular Culture; 1 (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 13-36. Carey's model is not the last word but it does serve as a helpful model for introducing the distinction I wish to highlight.

Carey has argued that according to the transmission view of communication, media carry information; a newspaper, for example, disseminates knowledge. According to the ritual view, however, a newspaper becomes a source of insight into the drama of 'contending forces in the world'.¹⁰⁰ In other words, the discourses it contains reflect and respond to the culture in which it was produced and interpreted. Of these two options, I suggest that Coelho and Chander have demonstrated more of a ritual understanding of the film in that each was consciously engaged in a local discourse about Jesus. Coelho wanted to emphasize his humanity in a context where gods and goddesses were represented primarily as supernatural agents. Chander wanted to free Jesus from the trappings of institutional Christianity and, I suggest, make Jesus accessible to Indian viewers as an object of devotion.

Furthermore, as I demonstrated in my review of the production history and content of the film, *Karunamayudu* is part of a larger discourse about the significance of Jesus in India, and even Indian cinema for Jesus.¹⁰¹ By emphasizing Jesus' compassion, the film also visualizes one of the primary ideals among South Indian religions.¹⁰² In my view, the film invites devotion to Jesus, but in so nuanced a manner that viewers' may interpret that invitation in accordance with their respective religious or theological traditions. Christian viewers may be more prone to contemplate the passion of Christ as an act of substitutionary atonement designed to absolve them of guilt before God. Hindu viewers, on the other hand, may pick up on Jesus' similarities to *avatars* of the more prominent deities that populate their epics and sacred writings. Although the film was designed to inspire devotion to Jesus, its production history anticipates it was never intended for use as an evangelistic tool.

Under Gilman's influence, however, it became just that and entered an orbit dominated by a transmission view of communication—that is, where its primary value has been determined by its effectiveness in achieving specific results. Granted, as noted above, Gilman has expressed an interest in Jesus' relevance to Indian culture. Whereas Coelho and Chander were content to let the film have its way with viewers and for viewers to have their way with the film, however, Gilman has

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 20.

¹⁰¹ For more on this theme, see the section in chapter 8 on the implications of this study for understanding Indian Christian theology.

¹⁰² For a separate treatment of this topic, see Dwight Friesen, 'Showing Compassion and Suggesting Peace in *Karunamayudu* an Indian Jesus Film,' *Studies in World Christianity* 14, no. 2 (2007).

employed it primarily as a tool for generating a particular response from viewers.¹⁰³ His appropriation of the film reflects the dynamics associated with Carey's transmission model of communication.

Carey's distinction as I have portrayed it is not meant to render one model exclusive from the other.¹⁰⁴ Carey himself admits that there is an element of transmission or dissemination in the communicative process. What he emphasizes, however, is that the meaning of media cannot be explained apart from the social or cultural context in which it is encountered.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, thinking of media as ritual rather than transmission provides a more comprehensive model for thinking about communication because it accounts for the social significance of media products. What Carey has emphasized, and my findings corroborate, is that a film like *Karunamayudu* is part of a much broader discourse than Gilman and his associates seem to have appreciated to date. Furthermore, I suggest that thinking of film through a ritual model of communication can encourage contributors to the discussion of film, religion, and theology to move beyond the rendering of static meanings of a given film. Granted, contributors to the discussion have long acknowledged the importance of attending to cultural when explaining the religious or theological significance of a film. The problem is that there has been a tendency to isolate that relationship to the period in which a film is produced and not account for its potentially ongoing, or even changing, significance as it journeys over time and through changing environments.¹⁰⁶

It would be instructive, for example, to hear Vijay Chander reflect on the film's journeys to date.¹⁰⁷ He agreed to let Gilman use the film for evangelism and he has maintained a friendship with Gilman over the years. Yet it would be instructive

¹⁰³ He claims that, 'When the audience looks up at the screen and sees Jesus heal the leper, they say, 'This must be true. These are our people telling the story'. Many times after a film showing, they ask, 'What village does Jesus come from?' "'This Must Be True", in *The Global Villager*, ed. Dayspring International (Virginia Beach, VA: Dayspring International, 2004), 4.

¹⁰⁴ Nor is it necessarily the best. I have, however, found it useful in this context.

¹⁰⁵ Carey, 21-22. For a discussion of the uncertainties and incompleteness of communication, see John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

¹⁰⁶ Janet Harbord's discussion of film cultures provides an important corrective here. Janet Harbord, *Film Cultures* (London: Sage Publications, 2002).

¹⁰⁷ It is not clear from Gilman's account that his long term intentions were obvious. Had this study been conducted closer in time to the film's theatrical release it would have been possible to provide a more even-handed analysis of its exhibition history.

to know how he interpreted Gilman's intentions when they first met, and what he thought would become of *Karunamayudu*.¹⁰⁸ Chander must be given the opportunity to give a fuller account of his own understanding of that transaction, as well as an assessment of the way in which the film has since been deployed. It is not obvious, for example, whether Chander has any recourse about how the film is currently used. When I pressed the matter with him, he politely declined to engage the question. He did tell me, however, that many viewers wrote to tell him that they had confessed faith in Christ after watching the film in cinemas.¹⁰⁹

Furthermore, there is the matter of how the film itself has been appropriated. Today it is not uncommon for movies to be released on DVD in various formats, for example, with or without a director's cut, or, alternatively, in 'family' versions. Nevertheless, those configurations are commonly acknowledged and marketed accordingly. The freedom with which evangelical exhibitors of *Karunamayudu* have edited it to suit their own tastes, and appropriated it for their own objectives calls into question the selectivity with which Gilman has interpreted the role of the Holy Spirit in the film's history. Was the Holy Spirit leading in the production of the scenes that have been excised? What understanding of the nature of the biblical text do Gilman and his peers hold, if, as he has suggested, the film is able to communicate divine revelation more efficiently than any preacher ever could, or by implication, the scriptures themselves? On the other hand, this freedom to edit and reconstruct might also be seen as a form of discursive ritual, to use Carey's terms, of expressing shared beliefs.

Gilman has borne the bulk of the analysis in this chapter because of his prominent role in the history of *Karunamayudu*. Yet he may also be seen to stand in for numerous film evangelists around the world. He makes no claim to theological sophistication, and asserts that his first priority is to expose people to the good news of Jesus Christ. Given his claims about the Holy Spirit's role in the history of the film and his understanding of its efficacy, however, his claims raise critical questions for all film evangelists. One might read the following queries in the plural, as if addressed to all film evangelists. If, as Gilman has implied, *Karunamayudu* has the capacity to convey complex theological concepts with greater power and clarity than

¹⁰⁸ Gilman, 30-31.

¹⁰⁹ Vijay Chander, interview by the author, 16 November 2006, Hyderabad, India.

preachers ever have, why do he and his colleagues insist on complementing screenings of the film with running commentary, preaching, or prayer? Explicitly or implicitly, such practices acknowledge the ambiguities and limits of artistic expression. In a slightly different vein, given Gilman's faith in God's ability to work in and through adherents of different religions to produce a film that—by Gilman's account—represents the core Gospel message of Jesus, on what basis do he and his associates seek to use the film to encourage conversion to their brand of Christian faith and practice? Furthermore, given the degree of human involvement not only with the technical aspects of transporting and screening *Karunamayudu*, but also in the commentary, prayer and relationship building that typically accompanies each screening, why is so much agency attributed to the film itself? In the next section, I describe and discuss some of the activities and insights of some of the hundreds of Indian exhibitors who carry out the distribution and exhibition strategies for the film that Gilman continues to oversee.

4. What exhibitors have seen in *Karunamayudu*

So far this discussion of *Karunamayudu*'s distribution and exhibition history has focused on the film's transition from commercial to non-commercial cinema and the factors—personal, theological and logistical—that informed John Gilman's perception of the film. His strategy for showing *Karunamayudu*, however, has relied on a network of people who shared his vision of the film and its potential. Over the past three decades, that network has grown to include hundreds, even thousands of people, both in India and in North America. In order to gain some insights into exhibitors' perceptions of the film, I interviewed and observed a number of key people involved with *Karunamayudu*, ranging from administrators to members of the teams they oversee. I begin with a brief synopsis of the policies that guide these teams, followed by some reflections on feedback collected using both qualitative and quantitative methods.¹

4.1 Identifying exhibitors

Today, DE works in close co-operation with Operation Mobilization India (OM India), a Christian ministry based in Secunderabad, Andhra Pradesh, which also oversees the International College of Cultural Studies (ICCS). Co-ordination between the three organizations is facilitated by the fact that their offices are all on the same property. OM India is a branch of Operation Mobilization International, a Christian ministry with offices in one hundred and ten countries of the world, dedicated to evangelism and establishing Churches where none exist.¹¹⁰ In return for service on OM ministry teams, members are provided with accommodation and food as well as the opportunity to enrol free of charge in the Bachelor of Arts in Ministry program offered by ICCS.¹¹¹ Built into their ministry training requirements, including involvement with local churches, is the expectation that they will screen *Karunamayudu* an average of three times a week.¹¹²

OM staff members oversee the care and pastoral direction of these teams, while DE supplies and administers all the technical equipment. A standard kit includes an electric generator, a DVD player, loudspeaker system, data projector, screen, and copies of the film in the languages relevant to the areas to which they are assigned. According to the Dayspring website, there are currently around 275 teams exhibiting the film.¹¹³ According to Rev. S, the man responsible for OM ministry teams in AP, in an ideal scenario, the screening of *Karunamayudu* is preceded by the singing of songs or by a testimony from someone who has come 'to know the Lord from the film show'. It is also common for the film to be introduced with a claim like, '[it] is a God, who, whom we are going to screen, and he . . . is ready to change your life'.¹¹⁴ When the film is over viewers are invited to find out more about this

¹¹⁰ www.om.org

¹¹¹ These unpaid exhibitors represent a phenomenon in the history of film exhibition that has for the most part flown under the radar of academic inquiry.

¹¹² Rev. S, interview by the author, 17 January 2006, Secunderabad, India.

¹¹³ <http://www.dayspringinternational.org/history1> (accessed 02 March 2009)

¹¹⁴ Rev. S, interview by the author, 17 January 2006, Secunderabad, India.

God and his story. Sometimes copies of Luke's Gospel and other literature are handed out. New Testaments are sometimes offered for sale at reduced rates (5rs) and those who express interest are asked for their addresses so that team members can follow them up. Currently, DE / OM team members follow up contacts directly because they have found that local pastors do not always share their commitment to establishing new Churches.¹¹⁵ Occasionally, a 'seekers meeting' is held for people who wish to inquire about Christian faith. Teams are challenged 'to screen the film, and go village to village, also to see one Church planted through this media, or through their labour, in one year time'. That is not to say that Churches are expected to sprout in every locale where the film is shown, but the growth of the Christian Church through conversion is definitely the objective.¹¹⁶

Achieving these goals, therefore, depends on a network of Indian Christian exhibitors. In order to appreciate how they perceive the film and how it functions in their daily lives, I spent a few days in the company of a ministry team, conducted semi-structured interviews with its members, and administered a questionnaire to over three hundred of them. I now turn to consider some of their perspectives about *Karunamayudu*.

4.2 *Karunamayudu* in the life of an exhibition team

The team with which I spent a few days in 2006 consisted of four young men in their 20s, who lived in a small semi-detached flat in a city in northeast Andhra Pradesh. Their accommodation consisted of a kitchen, a main room where they slept on mats on the floor and kept most of their personal belongings, and a screened front porch that opened into a small yard shared with the next-door neighbours. The pillars on either side of the gate featured tiles sporting images of Hindu gods and goddesses, and a small cardboard sign reading 'OM Team' was stuck to the iron grill of the front door. Through the back door of the kitchen one could access a traditional Indian

¹¹⁵ There at least two explanations for this apprehension: an aversion to the strain of evangelical Christianity associated with Operation Mobilization, or a fear of persecution from religious extremists from other traditions.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

toilet and bath. I was provided with a folding bed from a local pastor set up in the front porch.

The leader of the team, whom I will refer to as J, was responsible to ensure that the basic daily schedule posted on the wall of their kitchen was observed. In this team's case, every hour from 5:30 A.M.–10:00 P.M. was officially accounted for.¹¹⁷ At least three hours a day were to be devoted to studying, and at least three hours to outreach, which can involve anything from leading Bible studies and visiting local church members, to screening *Karunamayudu*. The men also shared domestic duties, including cooking, cleaning, ironing, washing and shopping.¹¹⁸

As I discovered, screening *Karunamayudu* on a regular basis involves numerous logistical challenges. Almost every showing involves a new location, negotiating a different set of social dynamics, and adapting their equipment accordingly. Very little is predictable. In order to execute the screening I attended, for example, the team had to rely on connections with a local pastor who gives leadership to a Christian congregation in a village a few kilometres away from where the film was scheduled to show. Furthermore, it was his 4 x 4 that served as our transportation for the one and a half hour drive into the countryside.

We left on a Sunday morning and arrived at village A, where we joined the local congregation for worship under a thatched roof supported by wooden poles. After a tasty lunch and a brief rest, we visited the nearby village where the film was to be shown in order to determine the location for the screening and ensure that necessary permissions had been ascertained from the village leaders. One of the ministry team members and the elder who had accompanied us stayed behind to spread the word about the film and prepare the exhibition site, in this case a clearing on the outskirts of the village surrounded by a number of homes. While waiting for darkness to fall, we visited a small group of Christians in another nearby village to discuss future celebrations of the establishment of a congregation in that area. We returned to village A as darkness began to fall.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ All names have been changed to protect the identities of those involved, despite being given permission to name them.

¹¹⁸ They took liberties with their schedule, however, for the purpose of the weekend film screening.

¹¹⁹ I will briefly discuss the location and reception of the film in the subsequent chapter and will therefore keep related details to a minimum.

The course of events did not strictly follow the guidelines outlined for me by Rev. S. The team plugged into the local power grid instead of using their generator. There was no singing, and after only a brief introduction by one of the team members, the film began. Another fiddled with colour settings on the DVD player well into the first scenes of the movie, but no one seemed to mind. In the falling dark, I estimated that the initial audience consisted of approximately twenty people, and although darkness prevented a precise count, I estimated that the number of viewers reached sixty at its peak. Twice, J fast-forwarded the film: once through the scene where a young girl approaches a high priest for help with her barrenness, and second, through the extended scene of Jesus walking on water. Just before the end of the film, he paused the film for approximately four minutes while my guide gave a short message. The older pastor who had accompanied us was then invited to pray before the film was restarted.

At the end of the show that evening I asked my guide to inquire how many of the viewers had seen the film for the first time. Although this was the first occasion the film had been screened in the village, many indicated they had seen it before, on television. No monies were collected, and to my knowledge no one showed a particular interest in asking more about Christ. From my observation there was no loud weeping or animated response to the portrayal of Jesus' suffering. For the team, it was another showing to register on their reports. For those in the village it was at the very least an evening's entertainment. After the team packed up we returned to a nearby village for the night where we were hosted by a Christian family and early the next morning we headed back to the city.

The activities involved with this one screening of *Karunamayudu* consumed the better part of two days. Given that responsibility for showing the film is an assignment for these exhibitors, many of whom are younger than the film itself, I was curious to know how they perceived it. I discovered that their appreciation for the film is bound up with their own histories, experiences with the film and religious traditions. I learned, for example, that these men hardly ever watch other movies—at least not anymore. Both K and A acknowledged having attended theatres prior to 'accepting Christ', and both claimed to like 'fight' films more than 'romances'. Nevertheless, both admitted to having enjoyed *Titanic* (1997) and K later admitted that he had watched it a number of times. Since accepting Christ, however, they both

claimed they would only patronize a theatre to see a Christian film.¹²⁰ J, the team leader, added that he would not attend a cinema under any circumstances because it would be a bad example; how could he then instruct others not to attend? Furthermore, they all claimed that they would not watch any 'secular' films at home, either on DVD or television, although later J acknowledged having watched *Arm of God*, a 'secular' film, on CD because he liked the fighting.

Watching movies is not in itself a problem. K informed me that he had two movies in his possession purchased from the OM bookstore, one of which was entitled *Megiddu*.¹²¹ Theatre attendance and 'secular' films, not film-viewing itself, were seen as potential spiritual contaminants. As my guide, R, later clarified, it was not fighting scenes themselves that were the problem in 'secular' films, but that the heroes win through violence. Likewise, dancing itself is not problematic, but the seductive apparel and gyrations of female cabaret dancers in the 'secular' movies can be an unwelcome source of temptation for Christian men.¹²²

Apprehensions about cinema attendance are still common among Indian, and especially Protestant, Christians. According to Dasan Jeyaraj, a leader in OM India, this reticence reflects the influence of 'puritan and pietistic religious stock'.¹²³ Aversion to the cinema, however, is not necessarily transferred to television. Sham P. Thomas, an Indian communications scholar, discovered in his analysis of media practices among Marthoma Christians in Kerala, that while avoiding the cinema was a key to 'Marthoma identity', television had become readily accepted in the home, for at least three reasons.¹²⁴ When watching television, viewers have control over content, context, and company. Second, television provides more options than one finds at the cinema, and third, 'the tag of modernity and mobility' associated with

¹²⁰ Personal interviews by the author, 21-24 January 2006, Tanuku, India.

¹²¹ Ibid. More details about this title unavailable at this time.

¹²² Personal interview by the author, 21 January 2006, Vijayawada, India. This explains why certain scenes were cut from the film by individual exhibitors in the early days and are not included on the latest DVD versions of the film. A brief discussion of how the term 'secular' is employed in related discourses follows below.

¹²³ Dasan Jeyaraj, Unpublished PhD dissertation. 'Followers of Christ Outside the Church in Chennai, India: A Socio-historical study of a non-Church movement'. The Faculty of Theology (Utrecht University, The Netherlands, 2009). That said, not all branches of Hinduism necessarily endorse images or movies, either.

¹²⁴ Thomas and Mitchell: 33. For a more detailed discussion, see Sham Padinjattethil Thomas, 'Prime Time and Prayer Time: Television, Religion and the Practices of Everyday Life of Marthoma Christians in Kerala, India' (Unpublished Dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 2005).

television 'seems to have made it more glamorous and desirable'.¹²⁵ Although I did not discuss television-viewing habits in my conversations with my OM hosts, their general attitudes are consistent with those encountered by Thomas.

In sum, from my interactions and observations with these four men, I observed that cinema-attendance at secular movies remains a taboo for many Christians in India, especially those training for ministry. The seeing and showing of *Karunamayudu*, however, is acceptable because of its content and because the contexts in which it is typically shown can be controlled. At the same time, however, as Stewart Hoover and associates have discovered in their analysis of television-viewing habits in America, the accounts people give of their media practices are not always consistent with their confession. Furthermore, it appears that for many South Indian Christians, the context in which a film is seen can be as much of a contaminant as its content. In order to place these four exhibitors' comments and practices in a broader context, however, I was pleased to be able to survey over three hundred of their peers.

4.3 Exhibitors' perceptions of *Karunamayudu*

Once a year, all the ministry team members enrolled at ICCS gather for intensive in-class sessions on the OM campus, and it was during one such convention in 2006 that the dean of ICCS kindly granted me an opportunity to conduct a survey of the teams present.¹²⁶ Of the 319 who returned their questionnaires, 222 were men, 97 were women, and the average age of those surveyed was 23. Respondents represented seventeen Indian states, one Union Territory and the country of Nepal. Given that English was not the first language for many, their responses were at times difficult to decipher. What follows immediately below is a summary and discussion of their answers to a constellation of indirect questions meant to generate insights

¹²⁵ Thomas and Mitchell, 'Understanding Television and Christianity in Marthoma Homes, South India', 33-35.

¹²⁶ See Appendix A.

into *Karunamayudu*'s significance in their daily lives as well as their observations regarding its reception.¹²⁷ Space allows only for a few brief observations.

Generally speaking, the exhibitors in this group gave a positive assessment about the film. When asked whether they preferred *Karunamayudu* to other Jesus films, 187 out of 222 male respondents, and 74 out of 97 female respondents answered in the affirmative. On the other hand, fifteen of the ninety-seven female respondents indicated they did not prefer *Karunamayudu* over other Jesus films. That said, five of those fifteen then provided very complimentary comments about the film, which suggests that they may not have understood the question. Six indicated that sometimes, for a variety of reasons including over-exposure to the film through television broadcasts or multiple viewings, people did not want to see *Karunamayudu*. Therefore, they would show other films. One woman included the following list of alternatives: *Passion of the Christ*, *Rich Fool*, *Jesus* (CCCI's 'Jesus film'), *Moses*, *Pilgrimage*, and another title that I could not decipher.¹²⁸ Two commented that they did not have other 'cassettes', that is, other movies, and therefore did not have alternatives to compare with or show.¹²⁹ One bemoaned that since the film is Indian, only Indian viewers come to see it, a perspective that runs counter to the majority of male respondents who indicated their preference for *Karunamayudu* because it is an Indian film.¹³⁰ Lastly, one woman indicated that the film was 'old style', and therefore not very appealing. She did not, however, indicate a preferred alternative.¹³¹

Twenty of the 222 male respondents indicated that they did not prefer *Karunamayudu* to other Jesus films. Five of those then provided positive comments, suggesting that they may have misunderstood the question. One respondent's answer was ambiguous; it is difficult to tell if his comment that the film was made 'according to Indian culture' was perceived as a positive or negative factor.¹³² Only six took issue with the content of the film, their comments ranging from a sweeping statement

¹²⁷ This indirect approach to questioning was inspired by Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 206.

¹²⁸ (fR67). The combination at left represents my coding system for filing responses, all of which are housed by the author.

¹²⁹ (fR71, 94).

¹³⁰ fR28.

¹³¹ (fr79).

¹³² (m218).

about the theological mistakes in *Karunamayudu*, to criticism of its support for the worship of Mary (mR83), of the historical inaccuracy of the Barabbas / Judas subplot (mR83, mR148), and the lack of 'gospel sharing' in the film (mR170). At least three took it to task for being too long (mR83, 129, 170) and two for being outdated (mR130, 135). As one put it, most of the people in Andhra Pradesh were 'fed up with this movie' (mR135). Four commented about having no other option, or that OM required that they show only *Karunamayudu* (mR47, 70, 100, 187). On a more positive note, two suggested that it was not appropriate for certain audiences, and both suggested alternatives: *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) or *Muktir Path*, which I understand may not be a movie at all but a cassette presentation (mR16, 121). The latter conceded that despite his recommendation, he still liked watching *Karunamayudu* (mR121).

Some exhibitors also expressed reticence about the Roman Catholic overtones in the film. For example, one respondent noticed that some of the words have Roman Catholic inflections (fR91). Several expressed their discomfort with seeing Jesus bowing down to Mary (e.g., fR27, 45, 70, mR30). At least two found the 'Veronica' scene, where a woman discovers Jesus' visage imprinted on the cloth after she wipes his face with it, unbelievable (fR14, mR62).¹³³

In addition to these more theologically oriented comments, a number of respondents recorded bloopers or stylistic irregularities in the film itself, the most humorous of which is the observation that during Jesus' temptation a truck or tractor can be seen driving through the countryside behind him and above his shoulder (fR4, mR41). A couple mentioned how unrealistic it was for the blind man who sings near the outset of the film to be able to climb a mountain on his own (mR73, 93). At least one person commented disparagingly about the 'sexy' dress of a woman who serves Barabbas just before his arrest (mR43), and two complained of shoddy acting by the actor who played the leper healed by Jesus after his Sermon on the Mount. (mR14, 100). Such attention to detail is hardly surprising given the number of times some have seen the film.¹³⁴ Almost half of the ninety-seven female respondents, for example, claimed to have seen the movie over two hundred times with one reported having screened the film a total of six hundred times (fR31). One male respondent

¹³³ This exhibitor noted that 'many people raised question[s] about that scene', but was likely unaware that it derives from a medieval tradition.

¹³⁴ See Table 1 below.

reported seven hundred and fifty screenings (mR152). Granted, their claims are virtually impossible to corroborate, but even a conservative estimate suggests that these exhibitors have experienced a degree of exposure to the film that is only common to the most ardent movie fans. Although the general tenor of exhibitors' responses to the film was enthusiastic, it is significant that at least a few demonstrated a critical engagement with it.

Considering the focus of this project on the influence of religious and theological traditions on the way people have engaged this film, it bears emphasizing that a number of the more disparaging comments were directed at the influence of Roman Catholicism on the movie's content. Furthermore, few of the exhibitors I conversed with about *Karunamayudu* demonstrated awareness of the influence of Hindu traditions on its style and content. In the following section I discuss some of the major trends in exhibitors' evaluations of *Karunamayudu*.¹³⁵

4.3.1 *Karunamayudu* as culturally relevant

Most of the exhibitors who declared a preference for *Karunamayudu* over other Jesus film, attributed their decision to its cultural relevance for the Indian context. The following quote is fairly representative of comments from male respondents:

. . . this film is made in the Indian context. The actors are Indians and it brings relevance to the Indian people. It is original in vernacular language, not the [sic] translated from English. So people feel that it is from their own culture. (MR165)

Indian elements in the film referred to by exhibitors included Indian actors (e.g., mR165, 169; fR63, 92), Indian songs (e.g. mR180, 219; fR31), its 'Indian movie style' (mR108) and the slow and steady actions of Jesus (mR209). It is remarkable, however, that these exhibitors celebrate the Indianness of the film's content on the one hand, but seem oblivious to other aspects of Indian culture in the film, including allusions to Hindu mythology.

¹³⁵ See Appendix A for a copy of the survey questionnaire administered.

Female respondents emphasized the film's cultural relevance in a different way. When asked whether they preferred *Karunamayudu* to other Jesus films, the two words that recurred with the highest frequency among responses from female respondents were *understandable* and *clear*. One went so far as to claim that 'All people, they can understand clearly without explanation' (fR69). To 'understand clearly', in turn, invariably meant to recognize the significance of Jesus' divinity, his birth, death and resurrection, according to a Christian interpretation of those events.

4.3.2 *Karunamayudu* as inadequate

The relative confidence expressed by exhibitors in the cultural relevance of the film and its ability to communicate the portent of Jesus' birth, death and resurrection, however, was complicated when I asked them how they believed viewers would interpret the film if screened without accompanying commentary. Two responses were particularly indicative of exhibitors' lack of confidence in the film's ability to communicate the significance of Jesus on its own. One exhibitor noted that without complementary information, most viewers would think *Karunamayudu* was a 'sec[u]lar film'.¹³⁶ Another wrote, 'If [we] will show without explanation [t]hey think that it is a [ju]st normal movie. They will not understand that it is [a] real story'.¹³⁷ This statement alone deserves more careful attention than I can offer here, but I submit two comments, nonetheless. The tendency to use the term 'secular' interchangeably with 'non-Christian' was, from my observation, rather common among DE / OM personnel, and needs to be interpreted in that context. For example, Rev. S, the man who provides pastoral care for OM teams in AP, summarized the production of *Karunamayudu* as follows: 'This film was *not directed by any Christian, not done by any Christian*. It is done by *normal, secular*, movie people, to make money'.¹³⁸ Granted, his comments betray a lack of knowledge about the film's production history. Nevertheless, his use of the category of the secular is in keeping

¹³⁶ FR7.

¹³⁷ FR5.

¹³⁸ Italics mine. Rev. S, interview by the author, 17 January 2006, Secunderabad, India. I was surprised to find that he was not alone in holding such a view, despite the significant roles played by a Roman Catholic priest and a purportedly Protestant Telugu scriptwriter.

with a Western tendency to equate the secular with 'non-Christian' as opposed to non-religious.¹³⁹

A second possibility is that the respondent in question meant the phrase 'real story' to distinguish *Karunamayudu* as a historical film in contrast to the fictional narratives of 'normal / secular' or even mythological films. Helping viewers to understand or see *Karunamayudu* 'correctly' would likewise involve convincing them of its historical veracity, at least according to the exhibitor's understanding of history. This concern that the events of Jesus' life be understood as a 'real story' is not surprising, for, as New Testament scholar N.T. Wright reminds us, Christianity has always been concerned with historical questions, as it understands them.¹⁴⁰ Nevertheless, as recent debates about the historicity of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) suggest, how one perceives the possible relationship between history and reality in film is critical to how one responds to and uses such movies.¹⁴¹ George Custen's claim that one must treat biopics 'as real', 'not because they are believable' but because viewers often do, could be equally applied to exhibitors in this case.¹⁴²

The assertion that most exhibitors perceive the film to be inadequate on its own as a representation of the Gospel is further confirmed by responses to a question on my survey, which reads: 'If people saw the film *without any explanation or preaching*, what would they understand about Jesus?' Roughly two thirds of the female respondents commented to the effect that without some kind of explanation or preaching, viewers, especially those from other religious backgrounds, would not understand the significance of the movie. One woman wrote: 'They will think Jesus [is] also a *guru* or *sadhu*'.¹⁴³ A male exhibitor suggested that without any explanation Jesus would be perceived as 'one of the film hero[es]' (mR98) or a magician (mR116). Others suggested that he would be perceived as 'one among the other gods'

¹³⁹ As I discussed in chapter 4, in India, secularization tends to refer to a state of peace between religious communities.

¹⁴⁰ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), 11.

¹⁴¹ Kathleen E. Corley and Robert L. Webb, 'Introduction: *The Passion*, the Gospels and the Claims of History', in *Jesus and Mel Gibson's the Passion of the Christ: The Films, the Gospels and the Claims of History*, ed. Kathleen E. Corley and Robert L. Webb (London: Continuum, 2004).

¹⁴² George Frederick Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 7; quoted in Adele Reinhartz, *Jesus of Hollywood* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5.

¹⁴³ FR4. Emphases mine. See chapter 8 for a discussion of the film's portrayal of Jesus as a guru.

(mR204), or as the Christian God (mR170, 193); in other words, not pertinent to people from other religions. Three went so far as to suggest that without commentary, some would think that *Karunamayudu* was a Muslim movie, and that Jesus was a Muslim.¹⁴⁴ A more representative comment was this: 'They will not understand properly the birth of Jesus and sometime they may not accept Christ as a God. They will not understand about Jesus clearly'.¹⁴⁵

This acknowledgement of ambiguity in the film's portrayal of Jesus is not an indictment of the film, but it does call into question Gilman's claims about its capacity to communicate complex ideas with greater efficiency than preaching or teaching ever could. Furthermore, it raises questions about the Christology of the film, a subject to which I return in chapter 8.

To summarize, many of the exhibitors who have endorsed *Karunamayudu* as a culturally relevant, accessible, and historical account of Jesus' life on the one hand, have also claimed that if viewers are to appreciate its significance as these exhibitors understand it, screenings of the film must be complemented by input from external sources. In other words, exhibitors of the film have tended to assume that viewers will not be able to understand the full significance of Jesus' life and ministry without their help. Only two exhibitors suggested otherwise. One respondent suggested that 'through the work of the Holy Spirit God can talk' to viewers, even without input from exhibitors, (fR22). Another suggested that even without commentary or preaching, viewers might understand from the film that 'Jesus is God He died for us'.¹⁴⁶ These two, however, are a minority.

Despite its perceived inadequacy for others, however, these exhibitors nevertheless indicated that *Karunamayudu* has been a formative influence on their own perceptions of Jesus. One of the last questions on the survey reads as follows: 'How has the film influenced your personal understanding of Jesus?' Responses varied, but exhibitors generally emphasized how the film has inspired their faith in Christ (fR22), engendered a burden for non-Christians (fR3), encouraged them to practice humility in daily life (fR8, mR14), reminded them of God's love for them and others (fR12), and encouraged them to forgive (fR34). One respondent noted, 'it

¹⁴⁴ FR18, 19, 71.

¹⁴⁵ Fr62.

¹⁴⁶ FR9.

has influenced me to understand Jesus in [the] context of our Indian way so that we can share with other[s] in the same way' (mR31). For another, reflecting on the film purportedly led him to the recognition that 'Really, we are [the] life of Christ' (mR105). Perhaps most significant for this study was the comment: 'By film we can show on our eyes. That scene take[s] me into my heart. When I show I thin[k] Jesus is cru[c]ifying for me, even now also. When I show, it remind[s] me again and again' (mR208).

5. Conclusion

In this chapter I have combined historical analysis, a limited ethnography, semi-structured interviews, and quantitative analysis to provide a critical account of *Karunamayudu's* distribution and exhibition history. I employed James Carey's theoretical distinction between a ritual and transmission view of communication to differentiate the ways that *Karunamayudu's* producers and its evangelical distributors and exhibitors have understood it to function. As I argued in chapter 5, the film may be interpreted as a non-sectarian invitation to become a devotee of Jesus. In the hands of John Gilman and his associates, however, it has become a vehicle for encouraging conversion to Jesus Christ. Its generally popular reception has also affirmed Gilman's faith in visual media as a superior means of communicating divine revelation.

My analysis of Gilman's guiding assumptions about the relationship between film, theology, and culture revealed that his enthusiasm for the film is derived from a deep faith in the power of visual media to communicate divine truth, a tendency to conflate film and scripture, and an instrumentalist view of media that tends to focus narrowly on its ability to generate certain desired effects. Consequently, he runs the risk of perceiving viewers as *tabula rasae* and reducing the complexities of culture to yet another neutral medium for transmitting what he believes to be the core aspect of the Christian Gospel. Likewise, an inordinate focus on the film's agency downplays the role of exhibitors in influencing viewers' responses to the film.

Furthermore, my interaction with a number of *Karunamayudu's* Indian exhibitors complicates Gilman's sweeping assertions about the film's capacity as a

pedagogical tool. Although most of the exhibitors I surveyed considered it a culturally relevant, understandable, and realistic portrayal of the life of Christ, they also called into question its ability to convey the significance of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection to viewers unfamiliar with Christian faith and doctrine. That said, repeated exposure to the film has served as a devotional aid for many of its exhibitors, encouraging them to imagine what it means to live like Jesus in India.

The lack of critical reflection about the film I encountered among the exhibitors I interviewed may reflect enduring apprehensions about film that have curtailed cinema attendance and film criticism among Indian Christians for decades. It should not be assumed, however, that all Indian Christians are as cautious about the medium or even that the perspectives of all exhibitors interviewed are fully represented here. Subsequent studies could fruitfully explore attitudes among Indian Christians about film generally, and *Karunamayudu* in particular, in order to compare those patterns with the rest of the Indian populace.

In this chapter provided only a cursory introduction to the theological, perceptual, and cultural frameworks that a select group of *Karunamayudu*'s distributors and exhibitors have negotiated in using this film for Christian evangelism. Nevertheless, the dynamics that have shaped those negotiations demonstrate the inadequacy of a strictly instrumentalist understanding of communication and media for understanding and appreciating the religious and theological significance of *Karunamayudu*. They also point to the contingencies that inform the reception of the film.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A reception analysis of *Karunamayudu*

1. Introduction

In this chapter I consider the reception of *Karunamayudu* from three perspectives. In the first section I summarize two conversations I had with people who viewed the film when it was first released in South Indian cinemas. Then I recount my own observations of three public screenings of the film in South India in 2006. I devote the third section to a review of feedback from over three hundred recent exhibitors of the film on questions related to the film's reception. As a single observer, my ability to assess the multiple contexts and conditions in which the film has been screened over the last thirty years was limited.¹ Following Jonathan Culler, however, I was more concerned to understand the film's 'changing intelligibility' for viewers 'by identifying the codes and interpretative assumptions' that have helped viewers in a variety of contexts to make sense of the film.² My approach to the reception of *Karunamayudu* in this chapter is an attempt at what Janet Staiger has described as the 'job of a reception historian', namely, 'to account for the events of interpretation and affective experience'.³ Put differently, my objectives were twofold: to collect a

¹ For an introduction to studies in exhibition in America, see Ina Rae Hark, ed., *Exhibition, the Film Reader* (London: Routledge, 2002), 1-2.

² Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 14, quoted in Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton; Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1992), 9. Culler is summarizing Hans Robert Jauss. This approach is similar to Martin Barker's 'pro-filmic' theory which turns on the premise that films generate roles, or call for certain interpretative skills on the part of audiences—I prefer 'viewers'—that they may or may not be able to supply. Martin Barker and Thomas Austin, *From Antz to Titanic: Reinventing Film Analysis* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 12, 37. It is also reminiscent of David Morgan's discussion of 'covenants with images' in which he outlines a range of agreements or assumptions that viewers bring to their engagement with visual products. David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), chapter 3.

³ Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2000), 1.

variety of data about the film, and then to discuss what role, if any, religious or theological influences have played in its reception, especially among 'untutored' viewers.⁴

In addition to the challenge of articulating my specific curiosity about the film, I wrestled with the methodological question of how to present my claims such that others might arrive at similar conclusions from the same data. Given the impossibility of others reproducing the exact conditions in which I recorded my observations, I was fortunate to be able to collate material from multiple sources using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods.⁵ In this chapter, therefore, I have invoked perspectives on *Karunamayudu*'s reception drawn from my own observation of three public screenings of the film, input from its exhibitors, and semi-structured interviews with viewers.

My conclusions are admittedly limited in scope. Nevertheless, the evidence collected here sheds some light on the influence religious or theological traditions have had on viewers' engagement with *Karunamayudu*. Most significantly, by virtue of its relative novelty, this study highlights the lack of reception studies related to Jesus films, despite their historic deployment in the cause of Christian witness.

2. *Karunamayudu*'s initial reception: two conversations

In chapter 4 I noted that Fr. Christopher Coelho (screenwriter / co-director) described the final release of *Karunamayudu* as 'mediocre'. Nevertheless, the film's positive reception led him to conclude that despite his peers' 'naïve sense of drama and lack of ability to express themselves in film', the film 'spoke the "language" of his people' in a way that Western films could never achieve, despite their cinematic sophistication.⁶ Not only was it a success at the box office, the film generated a response from

⁴ I am inspired here by Janet Staiger's assertion that reception analysis can contribute to the rewriting of general film history. Staiger, *Interpreting Films*, 12. For references to 'tutored' accounts, see *Ibid.*, 38, 48.

⁵ For an example of the challenges of making cross-cultural reception researchable, see the introduction to Barker and Austin, 41.

⁶ Coelho, 'How Hindus Filmed the Life of Christ,' 19.

viewers in South India similar to that which accompanied the release of Indian cinema pioneer D.G. Phalke's *Lankha Dahan* (1917).⁷

Karunamayudu's positive reception has been attributed to at least three factors: cinema's popularity in India, the population's 'openness to religious ideas' and the fact that it was not produced by Christians, thereby avoiding charges of foreign interference or proselytization.⁸ Unfortunately, given that thirty years had passed since the film's release, it was difficult to find evidence to either corroborate or contest these claims. Therefore, I was delighted when in 2006 I was able to conduct two semi-structured interviews with people who saw the film when it first appeared in South Indian cinemas.⁹ I have summarized my conversations with them below. Both were Telugu-speakers from Andhra Pradesh and when I spoke with them both were serving as Christian ministers, albeit in different denominations. The first I will refer to as Bishop J and the second as Rev. MK.¹⁰

Bishop J frequented the cinema regularly in his youth and claims that he has only seen about three films produced in Telugu that have anything to do with Jesus.¹¹ Some Tamil and Malayalam films contained bits of Jesus' story; he might appear in a dream sequence, for example. He also remembered seeing a Tamil movie of Mary's life, but seems to have been unaware of P.A. Thomas's *Jesus* (1973). According to his recollection, however, *Karunamayudu* was the first full-length 'Christian picture' of Jesus' life ever released in the history of Andhra Pradesh. Bishop J emphasized that even orthodox (by which I assume he meant conservative) Christians patronized the cinemas, implying that such a practice was highly unusual.¹² He recalls watching it around two dozen times in the cinema and claims that it was also popular among viewers from other religious traditions

⁷ See chapter 6, 134.

⁸ 'India,' *The Tablet*, 9 February 1980, 19.

⁹ Unfortunately, to date, I have not met any women who saw the film when it was first released.

¹⁰ To date, and for various reasons, I have not yet been able to discuss the film at length with viewers outwith the Christian tradition or those involved with its production and distribution, who were present at its cinematic release. 'Bishop J', interview by the author, 21 January 2006, Tanuku, India; 'Rev. MK', interview by the author, 06 December 2006, Bangalore, India.

¹¹ Unless otherwise noted, the following account of is derived from 'Bishop J', interview by the author, 21 January 2006, Tanuku, India.

¹² This exceptional validation of the cinema is not unlike that reported by Janet Staiger regarding the release of the movie rendition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903). Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema*, 105.

As he remembers, 'Hindus, and all the religious people went' to see the film. Hindus especially did not mind counting Jesus as one of their gods, and he claims that some felt that if they went to see the picture, 'something good' might happen. This latter comment corroborates my hypothesis that at least some viewers, informed by the beliefs and practices commonly associated with Hinduism, might have treated the screening of *Karunamayudu* like a visit to a temple. It would have been perceived as an opportunity to receive blessings, or take *darshan* with a god—in this case, Jesus.¹³ Later, Bishop J stated that some viewers might have thought Jesus was looking at them directly from the screen and suggested that the producers of *Karunamayudu* may have shown Jesus 'very closely' for this purpose.¹⁴ If some Hindus screened the film with a view to being blessed or to add Jesus to their personal pantheon of gods, however, other viewers were reportedly converting to Christianity. In Bishop J's words, they were 'receiving . . . the gospel' in the cinemas.¹⁵ Vijay Chander later mentioned to me that numerous people told him they had converted to Christianity after watching the movie in the cinema.¹⁶

According to Rev. MK, a Lutheran pastor, the attendance of Christians at the cinema was indeed unusual, since for many, especially Christians in villages, it was an activity they commonly considered incompatible with a Christian lifestyle.¹⁷ He was a young pastor at the time, and the film's release was of special interest to him for pastoral reasons. Since Christians in India did not have access to the funds or resources to produce feature films, he contends that they patronized local cinema halls in unprecedented numbers out of curiosity to see how Hindu producers and

¹³ For more on *darshan*, see Diana L. Eck, *Darsān: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 2nd rev. and enl. ed. (Chambersburg, PA: Anima Books, 1985).

¹⁴ I take this to be a reference to the extreme close-ups of Jesus that occur at least three times in the film. Philip Lutgendorf notes an emphasis on 'the eyes as communicators of emotion (for example, the popular 1970s and 1980s technique of repeated facial zoom shots, locking on the eyes, during moments of high emotion)'. Philip Lutgendorf, 'Is There an Indian Way of Filmmaking?', *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 10, no. 3 (2006), 232.

¹⁵ 'Bishop J', interview by the author, 21 January 2006, Tanuku, India,

¹⁶ What we do not know is what these self-reported converts meant by conversion. Did they add Jesus to their personal pantheon of gods, or did they leave their religious traditions behind entirely and identify publicly with the institutionalized Church?

¹⁷ Unless otherwise noted, the following account from is derived from 'Rev. MK', interview by the author, 06 December 2006, Bangalore, India.

directors would portray Christ. He recalls villagers boarding buses or riding in bullock carts to towns that had theatres in order to screen the film.¹⁸

By Rev. MK's account, they were not disappointed. Vijay Chander (Jesus) acted very well, except in MK's view he could have been more assertive when dismissing Satan during the scene of his temptation. Minor quibbles aside, MK was impressed with the direction of the film. He noted that some viewers did not like the two dance scenes—in the original version both Mary Magdalene and the daughter of Herodias (traditionally identified as Salome) perform for King Herod—but he found their inclusion defensible on historical grounds.¹⁹ Not only does Matthew's Gospel record that Herodias' daughter danced for Herod (Matt. 14), it is not unthinkable that kings would have had dancers in their courts.²⁰ The passion of Jesus and related songs were also 'very good' and in his view the film was faithful to the Gospels.

Furthermore, he deemed it theologically satisfactory, save that the scenes of Jesus' baptism caused some confusion among his congregants. The Gospels do not articulate precisely how John baptized Jesus, but in the film Jesus is immersed in the river. Since Lutherans have traditionally practiced baptism by sprinkling, the film's portrayal of Jesus' baptism, ostensibly a representation of the biblical text, was perceived as a challenge to that tradition. MK resolved the question by emphasizing the significance of baptism over modes of practice, but it is nevertheless worth noting that for some members of his congregation the film was accepted as sufficiently authoritative to challenge long-standing traditions.

Given his claims about *Karunamayudu's* faithfulness to the biblical text, I was curious to know what he thought about the extra-canonical narrative involving Judas / Barabbas. He replied that although it was not in the Bible, it was likely taken from the 'traditions'. Since he is a pastor, I also quizzed him about the implications of the scene where the integrity of the religious leaders is called into question by hints of sexual impropriety. He replied that corruption in the priesthood has been a historical problem. Not only was it a problem in Jesus' day, it was a key impetus for

¹⁸ This claim corroborates Vijay Chander's description about attendance levels for the film. Sri Sathavahana, 'Vijaychander, Born to Perform Jesus', www.ilovehyd.com <http://www.ilovehyd.com/interviews/interviews-vijaychander-born-to-perform-jesus.html> (accessed 12 May 2005).

¹⁹ 'Rev. MK', interview by the author, 06 December 2006, Bangalore, India.

²⁰ As noted elsewhere, these two dance scenes were often cut when the film began to be used for evangelism. John Gilman, interview by the author, 04 July 2005, Three Bridges, UK.

the Reformation. On a more personal note, he took it as a warning to pastors like himself to avoid such hypocrisy, and a reminder for viewers to beware the deception of money-mongers and omen-mongers.²¹

To this point, our discussion had been primarily concerned with exploring the relationship of the film's narrative to the biblical text or theological traditions as well as its commentary on religious institutions. Given that he was one of the few people I encountered who had actually seen the movie upon its release in cinemas, however, I was keen to return to the topic of viewer response. When I asked whether he could recall anything that people had said about the film after watching it, he replied, 'When they [saw] the picture, they felt that Jesus was in front of them. . . . *So many people said that . . . even Hindus also*'.²² I then asked if he knew whether people gave any indication of wanting to follow Jesus after watching the movie, despite the fact that in the cinema there was no preaching, no prayer and no formal invitation to do so. Although he had no concrete examples to offer, he suggested that many people, especially women, turned to Jesus Christ, or 'became secret disciples'. People were attracted to Jesus, he argued, by how different he was from Hindu gods that tend to be portrayed with human characteristics. Jesus, by contrast, and though portrayed as a man, had godly characteristics. He was holy, he suffered for others, he was compassionate, and so on. One of the most powerful examples of Jesus' compassion, Rev. MK explained, was his healing of a leper. Even though scientists have demonstrated that leprosy is not contagious, lepers in India are frequently still treated as if they are cursed. The miraculous aside, for Jesus as God to voluntarily touch a leper demonstrated a degree of compassion and identification with humanity that reportedly touched Rev. MK's heart as well as that of many other viewers, whether Christian or not.

This 'touching of the heart' was often manifested in tears, especially during the crucifixion scene. He wept, along with everyone else, so I asked him why he thought crying was such a common response. First, he explained, someone was being treated brutally. Second, even Hindus have heard, whether through sermons or radio programs, that Jesus is god. Therefore, when they see Jesus suffer, their hearts 'automatically melt and they cried'. Third, it was a 'good picture'. When I suggested

²¹ Vijay Chander told me in personal conversation that for him, the villains of the movie were the religious leaders. Vijay Chander, interview by the author, 16 November 2006, Hyderabad, India.

²² Italics mine to reflect his emphasis.

that Western viewers may not be as prone to emotional responses of this nature, and asked if he had any explanation for this propensity among fellow viewers, he replied that in India, people watch films with their 'total body, mind and spirit'.²³ Therefore, he suggested, they cry automatically, even without knowing it, especially at the brutality with which Jesus was treated. I queried whether he thought such responses represented a kind of identification with Jesus based on injustices that they, too, had experienced. He responded indirectly by telling me a story.

A few years ago he was invited by the producers of *Shanti Sandesham* (2004), one of the most recent movies of Jesus' life produced in Andhra Pradesh, to provide some feedback on its development. After watching the footage, he suggested that they needed to 'intensify' the crucifixion of Jesus, to which they reportedly responded with apprehension, 'Shall human beings beat God?'²⁴ I concluded from Rev. MK's story that he was suggesting that Jesus' suffering, as God, and in spite of his compassion, was unusual and somehow therefore solicited the empathy of viewers, but I do not have corroborative evidence to support that assertion.

Before moving on from these two accounts of the film's early reception, I pause to recall the objectives of this study. If we reconfigure Jonathan Culler and Janet Staiger's assertions about the task of the reception analyst as evaluative questions, then we might ask what these two conversations reveal about the 'codes and interpretative assumptions' that have made *Karunamayudu* meaningful for these men or their fellow viewers. Additionally, what account might one give of the 'events of interpretation and affective experience' they represent?²⁵ Rather than draw any definitive conclusions at this point, however, it is possible to piece together a profile of the various factors that were at work in viewers' initial reception of *Karunamayudu*. One was novelty. As Bishop J noted, it was the first full-length Telugu feature film of Jesus' life to be released in South India and people from a variety of backgrounds were curious to see how his story had been treated. Another factor may have been star power. Although Vijay Chander had yet to become a household name, a number of well-known actors including Chandra Mohan and

²³ So do some Western viewers, for that matter. It may be the case, however, that Indian films are designed more deliberately to evoke emotional responses in a way that Western films generally are not.

²⁴ Most of these viewers, if not all, were purportedly of Hindu background.

²⁵ Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception*, 1.

Jaggiah played key roles in the film. Furthermore, Krishna Fernandez, one of the more popular singers at the time, sang the lyrics on the soundtrack. Additionally, according to Bishop J, some viewers brought certain assumptions to their screening of the film. A number from Hindu backgrounds reportedly assumed that by viewing the film they would experience something good in their lives, although their specific expectations were not articulated. Furthermore, Bishop J acknowledged that some viewers *might* assume, and Rev. MK asserted that some viewers *did* assume that Jesus was looking right at them from the silver screen. In other words, they believed that the movie could function as something akin to an icon or a deity in a temple or shrine. Whether viewers reserved such expectations for movies about prominent religious figures or deities is a question that deserves further attention. That some Christians made an exception to their general abstinence from cinema attendance in order to see *Karunamayudu* raises questions about their assumptions regarding films and the contexts in which they are viewed. It may be that in deciding to attend the cinema, these Christians demonstrated their conviction that the content of *Karunamayudu* could somehow override the otherwise detrimental influences of the cinema hall itself.²⁶

It would be unwise to extrapolate from these two in-depth conversations any general conclusions about the assumptions that viewers brought to the screening of *Karunamayudu* in the cinema. Furthermore, these two accounts provide little insight into the way that the film's first viewers interpreted the film. They do not tell us, for example, how the film's composition—editing, mise-en-scène, lighting—or the significance of certain symbols were assessed. Neither do they provide much insight into the affective experiences of viewers, except to suggest that Indians may vocalise or otherwise act out empathy for film characters more readily than Western viewers do in the context of a cine-plex. What these interviews do provide, however, is some evidence of how people from various religious traditions articulated their encounters with *Karunamayudu* in the context of commercial cinemas, and without complementary commentary from Christian evangelists.

Having begun with two focused recollections on the early reception of the film in commercial cinema, I now pull back to provide a glimpse of how viewers

²⁶ As noted in the last chapter, cinema-attendance, not necessarily movie-watching, is considered taboo by some Christians in India.

have responded to *Karunamayudu* in non-commercial contexts where its exhibition has been framed by the concerns of Christians. Accompanying this shift in context were also alterations to its content. As I mentioned in chapter 4, selected scenes that were deemed to be offensive, unnecessary, or had suffered the ravages of the elements, were often edited out of the early reels. Subsequently, many of the VCD and DVD copies of the film now in circulation do not include the whole of the original film.

3. Watching *Karunamayudu*: case studies in reception

One of the most striking differences between the commercial and non-commercial settings in which *Karunamayudu* has been screened involves the spaces in which it has been exhibited. They are significantly different from those assumed by most analyses of film reception today. In her discussion of the difference between cinematic and televisual spectatorship, Anne Friedberg outlined 'six precepts of cinema spectatorship' that have been common to the cinematic experience. They include: a 'dark room with projected luminous images'; an 'immobile spectator'; 'single viewing'; a 'noninteractive relation between viewer and image'; the 'framed image'; and a 'flat screen surface'.²⁷ As she argues, television viewing tends to occur in quite different conditions. For example, 'the television is a light source, not a projection', viewers often move about, reruns make it possible for viewers to 'catch up with missed programs', viewers can choose what to watch and when, and the scale of the image is radically different. Only the screen's two-dimensionality remains virtually unchallenged.²⁸

I have made reference to Friedberg's discussion for two reasons. The six precepts she lists demonstrate how limited in scope current discussions of film reception have been with regard to the conditions in which films are viewed. Granted, North America has its drive-ins, but for the most part film reception studies have tended to be concerned with the controlled environment of the theatre.

²⁷ Anne Friedberg, 'Spectatorial Flânerie,' in *Exhibition, the Film Reader*, ed. Ina Rae Hark (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 174. By 'single viewing' Friedberg refers to the 'reseeing of *exactly* the same image (s) over time'.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 175.

Furthermore, the conditions in which *Karunamayudu* has so often been screened over the last thirty years are about as different as the distinctions between cinema and televisual spectatorship that she explores in her article. In contrast to a darkened room, for example, *Karunamayudu* is frequently screened in a darkened village square, albeit lit by ambient streetlight or even the glow of the moon. In order to highlight these varied conditions, I now describe three different contexts in which I observed *Karunamayudu* being screened.

3.1 Site A: A tribal village in Andhra Pradesh

I discussed Site A briefly in the previous chapter. Therefore, the following treatment will be brief. The setting was a small Koya village in the West Godavari District of Andhra Pradesh (AP), India. They have traditionally been swidden agriculturalists, but have also derived a livelihood from the forests.²⁹ Although on a political level the Koya are treated independently from the Hindu caste system, supporters of the caste system reportedly treat them as one of the lower castes.³⁰ By contrast, a local Christian pastor from a nearby village told me that the Koya are happy to listen to messages in their own language, but do not tend to mingle with other people because of their high caste standing.³¹ According to my hosts it was the first time that *Karunamayudu* had ever been shown in that village, although most residents reportedly had television sets.³² Unfortunately, the version of *Karunamayudu* screened was Telugu, not Koya.³³

The screening that night took place on the edge of the village in a clearing surrounded by family dwellings. A cow was tethered to a large tree to one side of the exhibition area. Given that most viewers arrived in the dark it was difficult to observe their activities. I estimated that the twenty people were present when the film

²⁹ Swidden agriculture is another term for 'slash and burn' farming.

³⁰ Jan Brukman, 'Stealing Women among the Koya of South India,' *Anthropological Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (1974), 304.

³¹ This statement appears to run counter to Brukman's claims.

³² Brukman.

³³ What bearing that factor had on its reception is a question that exceeds this interrogation.

began but that the number of viewers present may have grown as high as sixty over the course of the screening. Most sat on mats on the ground, although residents of nearby dwellings brought out their own chairs. That at least one person came and went occasionally was observable by the bobbing of a cigarette in the darkness. The screening was uneventful and when queried, a number of the viewers indicated that they had seen the film before on television.

3.2 Site B: A town in Karnataka

The screening in Karnataka was a unique occasion, in that John Gilman and some American guests were in attendance. Consequently, Dayspring Enterprise and Operation Mobilization (hereafter DE / OM) leaders had travelled from Andhra Pradesh for the event. Since the region was known to be an area where Hindutva activists had opposed Christian events in the past, team leaders set out in the morning to obtain permission from local leaders. They also set up equipment for the evening's show. According to reports I received later, they encountered some resistance from some young men who complained that the team was out to convert them. The local chief overruled, however, and warned the objectors not to cause their guests any trouble. The event went off without any disruption.

Given the paucity of accounts currently available that describe non-Western film exhibition, especially in rural areas, I have chosen to recount the context of Site B in some detail. My objective is to convey the ethos in which such screenings often occur.

Most viewers were seated on the ground in a large clearing in the centre of the village. The screen, positioned at one end of the clearing, was some twenty feet wide by fifteen feet high and had been stretched over a frame constructed from bamboo poles. It was made of two large sheets that had been stitched together and occasionally rippled in the breeze. To the left of the crowd was a row of small homes divided by a narrow street. A large tree spread its branches over a good portion of the clearing and several people were seated beneath it or stood around its trunk. The estimated size of the crowd was between five and six hundred, but those numbers fluctuated as people wandered off or stopped by to watch on their way through the

clearing. To one side of the crowd was the village thoroughfare. Some residents watched from small porches on side streets, their features barely visible from the glow of smouldering coals over which they hunched in the darkness. Several viewers perched on a pile of large rocks at the rear of the clearing. For some time I sat nearby trying to monitor the reactions of four teenage boys huddled together beside me, two of whom were wrapped in a large scarf. Traffic on the through road was intermittent. One motorcyclist stopped to watch for a few minutes before continuing on his way.

At one point a tractor pulling a large wagon full of bricks roared into town and stopped near the big tree. Its driver and a couple of passengers hopped out but did not seem overly interested in the film. For a while I leaned against the side of the wagon to avoid standing in anyone's line of sight. To my right, the flicker of a match lit the wizened face of an older gentleman crouched in the darkness, his cheeks peppered with white whiskers. About ten minutes later the driver of the tractor and his companion, who had stopped for a few minutes to watch the movie, decided to carry on and pulled the tractor to the other side of the road in order to unload their cargo of bricks. An argument broke out between them, but no one seemed to notice. The volume from the public address system was set high enough that villagers one hundred yards away could have easily heard the film's soundtrack.

In a small shop across the street from the screen business was brisk and conversations continued unabated. Overhead the sky was clear and littered with stars. The night was cool and a number of viewers had wrapped scarves around their faces, leaving only their eyes exposed. Occasionally, mobile phones glowed or flickered among the small cluster of DE / OM team members near the back of the crowd. Just under the tree near where I stood was a small shop, the walls and roof of which were constructed from rusty panels of corrugated metal nailed to four rough posts. A single candle flickered over the spices and soaps on offer and for most of the duration of the film the proprietor stood just outside the shack to watch; business was slow. At one point a small black puppy sniffed around my feet before scampering away.

I was keen to observe the crowd throughout the event, but in keeping with Gilman's standard policy, none of the foreigners present emerged from their vehicle until several minutes after the film began. Thanks to a number of spotlights set up to

facilitate filming of the event, it was easy for me to observe the crowd.³⁴ To avoid drawing attention to myself, I first headed to the rear of the crowd and then later wandered around to observe viewers from a number of viewpoints as described above. As at Site A, viewers conversed freely and sometimes joked with each other. Occasionally viewers held their hands up in front of the lens to create shadows on the screen and it was not uncommon for viewers to interrupt the viewing by walking directly in front of the projector. Yet no one seemed to mind. Only once I was rebuked from the shadows for standing in somebody's line of sight.

I had been told by a variety of film team members that viewers typically cry during the crucifixion scene, so I watched keenly for glistening faces in the limited light. I witnessed at least two possible examples of such emotion, but neither was overt. A teen-aged girl in the back few rows wiped her face with the palm of her hand. Sitting under the tree was a father with a wee child on his knee; both were wrapped in a single cloth. At one point I noticed the man wiping his face, but I did not observe overt expressions of emotion. The leader of DE / OM ministry teams for Karnataka had told me that night that audience members have been known to throw rocks at Pilate on screen, yell at the soldiers, or even try to grasp Jesus' feet as he ascends into the clouds at the end of the film. Nothing so dramatic occurred on this occasion, but I was told later that a woman had lit a candle by each of the screen's supporting poles. I asked if it was her way of worshipping Jesus and was told it might be.³⁵

Veteran exhibitors of the film's audiences, including John Gilman, had told me that the crowd would 'settle down' during Jesus' passion and their predictions were affirmed. As tension mounted around Jesus' trial before Pilate, conversations died down. When they did occur, they were brief. Still, I noticed that the small group of teens that I was observing joked quietly among themselves even as Jesus fell under the weight of the cross. The only sort of general crowd response occurred when Jesus appeared to his disciples after the resurrection. Suddenly, people started clapping. What I could not tell, however, was who started it, viewers or some of the DE / OM team members.

³⁴ Thanks to Operation Mobilization for making available footage of that event. Since I do not know if OM videographers asked the crowd for permission to film, however, I have chosen not to include any screenshots in my analysis.

³⁵ Video footage of this event held by the author.

3.3 Site C: *An urban slum in South India*

The first two screenings occurred in rural contexts under the auspices of DE / OM. and followed the prescribed program outlined for me by Rev. Satyam, who oversees DE / OM teams in AP. In each case a DE / OM team member introduced the film, and occasionally provided voice-over commentary to explain the significance of events in the film's narrative. At Sites A and B the film was paused after the scene of Jesus' crucifixion for a brief homily and prayer as well as an invitation to come forward either for prayer or to 'accept Christ'. Christian literature was also made available free of charge after each screening and copies of the New Testament could be purchased at highly subsidized rates.

I was curious, however, to see how viewers would respond to the film without these structures. Therefore, just before the end of my second trip to India, I arranged with the leadership of DE / OM to screen the film in a slum in Bangalore, where the population consisted primarily of Telugu speakers. Furthermore, they agreed to screen the film without any prayers, introductions, testimonies or preaching. A Christian gentleman from the local neighbourhood association approached his Hindu peers on the committee for permission to hold the event. They not only agreed but permitted me to return a few nights later to conduct semi-structured interviews among members of the community.

The screening occurred at night in a clearing less than a block from a busy thoroughfare, tucked between dwellings on two sides and the rear wall of a Hindu temple on the other. The wall of the community centre, on which the screen was hung, formed the fourth side of the clearing. I deliberately slipped down the alley into the clearing after the film had started so as to avoid drawing attention to myself. I was joined by my contact and seated a couple of metres away from the majority of viewers, next to Rev. R, who was my guide and translator for the evening. On screen, Barabbas and Judas were deliberating in their camp before going to meet Jesus.

Had it not been for the sound of traffic nearby, we could have been in a village. Overhead was a large tree, the branches of which stretched over nearly the entire clearing. The square was partially lit by a street lamp. To my left was a building that appeared to be a community service office and bore a sign that was partially obscured, save the words, 'scheduled caste'. When we arrived I counted

approximately 70 children and 30 adults, but that number fluctuated considerably throughout the show. Children chatted freely among themselves, or got up to run about. A group of young men in their teens and early 20s leaned against the exhibitors' van at the back of the square. The wall of the temple that faced into the clearing was painted in alternating vertical stripes of yellow and red. A vehicle was parked against the wall, completely covered in a tarpaulin and behind it was a car that was pushed out of the clearing over the course of the night. Overhead the moon was bright. One loudspeaker blared at the crowd and occasionally the screen rippled in the breeze, making the characters' faces look like reflections in a pool.

The audience was never static. On one occasion a drunk stumbled by and then sat himself down near the projector and public address system. Two men rushed over to make sure he did not wreck anything. Five or six children first sat on and then took turns jumping off a pile of bulging sacks near the screen. No one seemed to mind that they occasionally obstructed the light from the projector. A man seated to my left commented sporadically about the film to Rev. R. Just ahead of him an older woman was curled up on a chair, wrapped tightly in a shawl. Occasionally parents shouted for their children for one reason or another, either for bed or to eat their evening meal. I noticed one woman who stood off to the right of the screen for most of the movie, almost without moving. Likewise, one man stood with a sleeping toddler in his arms for the duration of the film.

As the trial of Jesus developed, there was less chatter. The men who had been piled into the auto were now seated near it. Two sat on the laps of friends and two peered from behind the auto parked against the opposite wall. When the old woman to my left nodded off to sleep, a man came over and woke her up. Again, I looked for signs of tears or expressions of empathy. The only hint that anyone might be crying was from a woman of approximately fifty years of age, who at one point wiped her eyes and covered her nose. As scenes of Jesus' passion developed, viewers generally grew more attentive. I did not see anyone cry, but viewers were for the most part very attentive. Before the scene of Jesus' ascension was complete, viewers had begun to disperse.

4. Reflections

Lalitha Gopalan has referred to the action genre in Indian film as the 'cinema of interruptions'.³⁶ The moniker could just as easily be extended to include many of the contexts in which *Karunamayudu* is frequently screened. In contrast to the commercial cinemas where *Karunamayudu* was released, each of these non-ticketed events occurred out of doors in public spaces where viewers could come and go at will.³⁷ I took the liberty of describing these scenes in detail in an attempt to convey, particularly to Western readers, a cinematic ethos that has little in common with the multi-plex.

The only constants I encountered in the three screenings I attended included the projection equipment, the version of *Karunamayudu* that was shown, and the personnel responsible for its exhibition.³⁸ In contrast to the conditions of cinematic spectatorship summarized by Friedberg at the beginning of this chapter, not one screening occurred in a darkened room, nor were viewers seated in rows, facing forward. Few of the spectators remained stationary throughout the screening. Although for some viewers it was the first time they had seen the film, and had no control over the projection equipment, one could hardly accuse them of being non-interactive. Furthermore, the size of the screen was smaller than what one would expect to find in a cinema. Like the television or the drive-in screen, however, it formed just part of the viewers' visual horizon. Without meaning to be pedantic, the flatness of the screen could be called into question by virtue of its vulnerability to the elements, especially the occasional breeze. In short, the cinematic conditions in which *Karunamayudu* is typically screened have little in common with those around which most of the English literature on film reception currently turns.

Audience demographics also varied considerably. The smallest group was at Site A, the largest at Site B, and the median at Site C. They also differed by location. The first was a remote rural audience in AP, the second a larger rural centre in Karnataka, and the third, a slum community in one of Karnataka state's largest cities. In the first and third cases, the viewers were primarily Telugu-speakers. In the first

³⁶ Lalitha Gopalan, *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 2002).

³⁷ Anecdotally, all of the screenings occurred under a large tree.

³⁸ The one exception to this claim is that a Kannada version of the film was shown at the second site.

case, most people spoke Telugu, whereas in the second, Kannada was the dominant language.³⁹ Although the team of exhibitors in each scenario was affiliated with DE / OM, the individual exhibitors changed from site to site. In the first two settings, the programme of events basically followed the pattern prescribed by DE / OM, but in the third, there was no programme at all. The film was simply introduced and shown. Furthermore, in the first two settings DE / OM covered all the costs of exhibition, whereas I arranged for the third screening myself.⁴⁰

Before turning to consider what exhibitors of *Karunamayudu* have observed about the film's reception, I pause to register some preliminary observations about these sites. From my observation, viewers' responses to the film did not vary significantly from rural to urban settings, or whether or not DE / OM team members provided introductions or commentary. Furthermore, I did not observe the emotional responses to the film that promotional accounts of the film had suggested were commonplace. The one unique instance of reception that occurred involved a woman at Site B who stood up and walked in front of the crowd to light a candle by each of the bamboo poles holding up the screen before leaving the area. Unfortunately, I have no way of knowing anything more about what factors were involved in her response.

The major difference between these three scenarios has to do with post-screening events. Site B stands out in this regard. At Site A, although the film was paused for a brief sermon and prayer, viewers quietly melted away into the darkness or down the village paths to their homes. Viewers responded similarly in the third scenario, where there was no associated programme or invitation given for prayer or further discussion. At Site B, however, where there was a large crowd, and where there had been significant advance preparation by a group of DE / OM team members, approximately twenty people came forward for prayer and numerous pieces of literature were handed out.⁴¹

³⁹ The appropriate language version was used in each instance.

⁴⁰ I made a contribution to DE / OM to cover the suggested transportation and meal costs for the team. I also arranged for the team to forego any of the activities normally associated with a DE/OM film showing, including prayer, testimony, or preaching, in order to observe viewers' responses to the film without those additional influences.

⁴¹ This is a conservative estimate. Free literature was made available at a number of locations around the edge of the crowd, so it was difficult for me to observe how much was handed out.

My observations of these three screenings call into question how accurately promoters' accounts represent the film's general reception. They also raise questions about what is meant by reception—that is, do the post-screening events that often follow the screening of *Karunamayudu* count as reception? Is it possible to distinguish the influence of the film from that of the commentary, testimonies, and invitations for prayer introduced by DE / OM team members? For another approach to the question of the film's reception I now turn to consider insights from some of the film's exhibitors whose aggregate experience in screening the film represents locations and viewers from across India.

5. Exhibitors on the reception of *Karunamayudu*

There has been a tendency among film critics to speak on behalf of audiences in the first person, thereby conflating all viewers' responses to a given film with the individual perspective of the author.⁴² On the other hand, critics of film reception studies contend that viewer responses to films are equally subjective and difficult to validate through repetition. The ability to collate data from a variety of sources, sometimes referred to as triangulation, can at least help to establish trends in reception, if not provide repeatedly verifiable information.⁴³ Therefore, I was grateful to complement my observations of screenings with insights on the reception of *Karunamayudu* compiled from a survey of over three hundred of its recent exhibitors. Four of the twelve questions posed were directly concerned with the film's reception:

- From your experience, describe the *most common* audience responses during the film show.
- Do audiences in villages respond differently than audiences in cities?
YES / NO / NO COMMENT

⁴² For a pointed critique of this tendency, see Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema*, 12.

⁴³ For a discussion of the limits of triangulation, see Carl G. Herndl, 'Writing Ethnography: Representation, Rhetoric, and Institutional Practices.' *College English* 53, no. 3 (1991): 322, 327.

- Does a person's religious background affect their response to the film? YES / NO / Explain.
- After watching the film have audience members ever made comments comparing Jesus to other gods? YES / NO / If YES, please give an example.⁴⁴

Exhibitors' responses to these questions provided a helpful counterpoint both to my own observations and the semi-structured interviews I conducted with a variety of Telugu-speaking viewers of the film. I will now discuss briefly some of the dominant patterns or concerns that surfaced in their responses. My summary will follow the order in which the questions were posed and as quoted above.

5.1 Common responses

Exhibitors provided a variety of answers to the question of common responses to the film. Therefore, the following categories into which I have sorted exhibitors' replies are of my own construction. They include general comments common to pre-screening, during the screening, and post-screening.

For the most part, exhibitors claim to have experienced a positive response in anticipation of film's screening, especially in villages.⁴⁵ They are also conscious that this openness to the film has at times simply been an indication of boredom.⁴⁶ That said, and as already noted above, there have also been occasions where DE / OM teams have experienced resistance in advance of screening *Karunamayudu*.⁴⁷ In the latter scenario, the question deserves to be raised whether the antagonism is directed at the film itself or the activities typically involved with showing it.

⁴⁴ For a copy of the whole questionnaire, see Appendix A.

⁴⁵ I will discuss exhibitors' perceptions of the difference between village and city audiences below.

⁴⁶ F4, F95, F96. A note about coding. F=female / M=male / numbers refer to the number of the questionnaire, held by the author. Including them in this way makes tracing sources a straightforward process. For this section I break with standard citation conventions. Where three or more informants are referred to I include their details in the footnotes. One or two references will be placed in parentheses in the body of the text. Where a number of themes or phrases are mentioned in a single sentence, their referents will be separated by a semi-colon.

⁴⁷ The circumstances of the second public screening described above are a case in point.

Given the enthusiastic reports that have been propagated about viewer responses to the film, I was curious to learn what recent exhibitors had observed. When John Gilman first saw *Karunamayudu* in a small cinema in AP in 1979, he was struck by his fellow audience members' visceral response to the film. He reports that they

talked back to the screen and to each other. They cheered when Jesus drove the moneychangers out of the temple. When He healed the blind man and the leper, they broke into applause. Other times they would laugh or cry softly.⁴⁸

According to the exhibitors I surveyed nearly thirty years later, little has changed.

When asked to describe the most common audience response to *Karunamayudu*, approximately 71% of the exhibitors surveyed commented that viewers cry, especially at the scenes of Jesus' crucifixion. Exhibitors report that spectators have also been known to scold the Roman soldiers who whip Jesus (F79), to beat their own chests, screaming 'Jesus! Jesus!' (M184; F92), and turn away at the site of Christ's suffering on the cross (M43, 61). Some viewers apparently 'close their eyes because they feel it is reality' (M124, 204). Others have reportedly clapped at Jesus' miracles (M22, 158), whistled (M31), laughed (M13), shouted (M13), or bowed down (M4). In one village, an exhibitor reports, 'all the women[s] stood up and began to shout . . . saying, "Forgive us . . . forgive us . . . oh Lord . . ."' (M125). Unfortunately, a lack of data at this point makes it virtually impossible to distinguish gendered responses to the movie. One exhibitor suggested that the majority of those who cried were women and young adults (M30), or, as one respondent put it, the 'women wept and men were sad' (M14). Another clarified further that whereas women tend to cry, men *talk* about Christ's love (M159).⁴⁹ Not everyone, however, responds so viscerally or noticeably.

By contrast, one respondent claimed that very few of the viewers he had observed cried out during Jesus' crucifixion (M33). Some watched in silence,

⁴⁸ John Gilman, *They're Killing an Innocent Man*, Abridged ed. (USA: Dayspring International, 2001), 16.

⁴⁹ Italics mine.

attentive to the end (M26, 39). Indeed, this was my experience. During the three separate film screenings I observed, I saw tear-stained cheeks and people wiping their faces, but not once did I encounter animated responses like those described above. No stones were thrown at the screen and no one cried out.

That's not to say it does not happen and I can think of at least two possible reasons why this was my experience. Only one of the screenings I attended occurred in a village, where exhibitors report that viewers tend to be more emotionally involved.⁵⁰ Second, the film's saturation level is now quite high in South India, given that it has been regularly featured on television networks during Christmas and Easter. Even at the village screening in Site A viewers claimed that they had previously seen the film on television. By the time some see the film in a public setting, they may have already experienced a more emotional encounter with it in the privacy of their own homes. What cannot be ignored, however, is that almost without exception, whether informally or in more structured conversations, both women and men reported crying while watching the film, especially during the scenes concerning Jesus' crucifixion. In addition to these more visible responses, exhibitors also mentioned a range of emotive responses that might be described as more interior. They referred to viewers feeling a 'good inspiration' (M182), or being 'touched' emotionally and spiritually.⁵¹ Apparently some viewers have become very 'sad' during Jesus' passion or experienced fear when watching his crucifixion.⁵²

Some of the more popular explanations I have been given to date for the widespread emotional response of viewers derive from casual conversations with scholars, distributors and viewers. One claim, that struck me as a remarkable exaggeration and impossible to substantiate, was that the Indian psyche tends to be more empathetic than the Western one. It was also suggested to me that because poverty is so prevalent in India, many viewers can identify with the people Jesus ministered to; viewers purportedly cry either out of identification with his suffering or amazement at his mercy. A fellow passenger on a bus stated confidently that a movie is not considered a success unless women in the audience come out in tears; by implication, a tear-jerker will be successful. None of these casual explanations do

⁵⁰ Furthermore, many of the viewers in that particular village claimed to have seen the movie on television.

⁵¹ M76, 126, 145, 151, 179, 217, 220.

⁵² F1, 36, 90; F55.

justice to the complex matrix of factors that impinge on a film-viewing experience, regardless of geographical location. That said, it is instructive to recall that many Indian filmmakers consider the stirring of emotions to be integral to the success of an Indian film.⁵³ During Jesus' passion, for example, the lyrics of the song playing in the background emphasize the injustice that Jesus is enduring.⁵⁴ Whatever the explanation, it remains the case that Indian viewers of *Karunamayudu* are likely to be more emotionally engaged with the film than most Western viewers would be, and their visceral responses more likely to be tolerated than they would be in most Western multi-plexes.

Since one of the objectives for showing the film is to generate interest in Christ, exhibitors frequently engage in post-screening conversations with viewers. It is from such exchanges that the following observations by exhibitors derive. I have sorted them into the following categories: general observations about the film, questions, assertions, prayers, and active responses.

According to exhibitors, viewers generally have described *Karunamayudu* as a 'very good' film.⁵⁵ Others adjectives used include, 'excellent', 'wonderful', or 'nice'.⁵⁶ For some the story of Jesus is unique. One exhibitor's paraphrase of a viewer's response reads: 'very nice film, in our life we never see like this film' (F4). A further sign of the film's positive reception derives from the frequency of requests for repeat screenings. Approximately 12% of exhibitors noted that viewers had responded to the film by asking them either to show it again, recommending that they show it elsewhere, or asking for them to screen another film like it.⁵⁷ Exhibitors made little mention of negative responses but this could be because they tend to only report favourable comments. That said, one exhibitor suggested that some viewers find the movie boring.

⁵³ See chapter 4.

⁵⁴ Furthermore, the music played throughout the scenes of Jesus' passion may well be influenced by the *rasa* of *karuna* (compassion) thereby stirring up a spirit of sympathy, if not empathy in some viewers. By way of introduction to *rasas*, see Richard Schechner, 'Rasaesthetics,' *The Drama Review* 45, no. 3 (2001).

⁵⁵ Male exhibitors in particular, recorded the adjectives 'good' or 'very good': M1, 12, 20, 23, 32, 36, 48, 49, 64, 67, 83, 84, 85, 91, 97, 98, 112, 132, 141, 171, 174, 177, 186, 189, 203, 215, 218.

⁵⁶ Respectively: M143, 144; F17, M41, 167; F31, 43, 46, 51, 69, 83, 96.

⁵⁷ F13, 14, 18, 28, 37, 43 48, 53, 60, 69, 82, 88; M27, 35, 36, 49, 53. 62, 65, 66, 67, 79, M91, 97, 100, 105, 110, 137, 144, 167, 168, 170, 182, 190, 192, 199, 202, 203, 221.

Despite their generally positive accounts of *Karunamayudu's* reception, however, exhibitors have also registered instances of resistance or apathy to its screening.⁵⁸ Outright opposition has generally been attributed to political and religious extremists associated with various Hindu extremist groups. That a box-office hit about Jesus' life initiated by Hindu filmmakers could stir up opposition from such groups, however, raises important questions about what it is that is being opposed. After all, one of the objectives of the film's producer, Vijay Chander, was to strip him of his Western Christian trappings.⁵⁹ It is more likely, therefore, that the opposition experienced by exhibitors is not toward the movie itself, but the evangelistic activities with which it has been associated for nearly thirty years. This is an important distinction to make lest its producer's intentions be unwittingly conflated with those of evangelical Christians, or lest reports of opposition to its screening be misconstrued as opposition to the film itself. As I noted in chapter 6, the appropriation of the film deserves further interrogation.⁶⁰

In direct contrast to those who oppose the film, exhibitors have indicated that some viewers 'accept Christ' or 'believe to God' (F59, 85) as a consequence of watching the film. Unfortunately, exhibitors who made these comments did not include complementary detail about what such acts might entail.

Perhaps one of the most common post-screening responses is the posing of questions about Jesus, especially about the purpose of Jesus' suffering and execution.⁶¹ Why, for example, did people want to kill an innocent man?⁶² Why was Jesus beaten and why did he have to experience so much pain? Furthermore, why would God suffer?⁶³ Second, those enamoured by Jesus' ability to do miracles want to know whether he still performs them today; e.g., does he still raise people from the dead?⁶⁴ Others have inquired whether Jesus is the real, or true God.⁶⁵ Additional lines of questioning have focused on the 'good news' of Jesus, as well as his

⁵⁸ F57, 61; F4, 8, 45, 72.

⁵⁹ R. S. Sugirtharajah, 'Indian Cowboy, Hindu Christ,' *One World* 49 (1979), 19.

⁶⁰ Chapter 6, section 3.3.

⁶¹ General questions about Jesus: F16, 22, 54, 75, 76, 86, 87; M30, 46, 49, 61, 75, 137, 161, 194

⁶² M123, 142; F26, 37, 38, 63, 95.

⁶³ M24, F13, 37, 49, 90; M51, 96; M51, 96.

⁶⁴ F2; M22, 158; M108.

⁶⁵ F30.

parables.⁶⁶ One of the more fascinating aspects of Jesus' life and ministry for many viewers is his miraculous power.⁶⁷ Not only is it reportedly common for exhibitors to field questions about Jesus' ability to perform miracles today, they are often asked to pray for viewers, including requests for physical healing.⁶⁸ One exhibitor reported being asked whether it is still possible for people to be raised from the dead.⁶⁹

Not every viewer, however, fields questions. Based on exhibitors' comments, many viewers have reached their own conclusions about Jesus by the end of the film. Unfortunately, and because I did not request such clarification, it is impossible to indicate the religious background of the people to whom the exhibitors referred in the following comments. Some viewers reportedly have asserted that Jesus really did die for them, and that he is the 'real God' or 'living God', indeed 'Jesus is [the] saviour of universe'.⁷⁰ Others have been known to claim that 'Jesus was a good / great man (F63, 65), a holy man (F63), 'great saint' (M115), or a good man who showed love and goodness to every one (F25). One viewer described Jesus as an *avatar* (F25), and another as the 'love God' (F41). Perhaps, given the theme of the film itself ('Man of Compassion') it is not surprising that viewers have commented that, 'really, God loves us' (F48). For some, the idea that a God would become a human, suffer, die and rise again was a completely new concept (M124). One exhibitor noted that Hindus in particular are surprised by Jesus' compassion (M178). As one Hindu viewer reportedly stated in Hindi: 'How great God who died for us' (M92). Others have been impressed by Jesus' lifestyle and wish to emulate it (M80, 84, 87). Furthermore, some have objected to Jesus' crucifixion, claiming that Jesus should not have been crucified (M165), nor should he have been treated unjustly (M188). At times viewers' comments have taken on political overtones, as demonstrated by their perceptions of Jesus as a god of the poor, for the 'low caste people' (M16).

One of the more intriguing claims about the film involved perceptions of its spiritual efficacy. Two exhibitors recorded that the film has been attributed with exorcising demons (M102, 214). This effect was corroborated by JP, who claims to

⁶⁶ Respectively: M141; M186.

⁶⁷ This, despite deliberate efforts in the production stage to downplay the miraculous.

⁶⁸ F2, 4, 8, 27, 33, 41, 52 [after seeing miracles], 56, 90, 91; M15, 17, 26, 30, 43, 94, 104, 135, M137, 140, 160 [for sickness], 186, 200, 210, 217.

⁶⁹ M108.

⁷⁰ Respectively: F4, 8, 20, 21; F21, 39, 40, 51, 67;

have seen the film over 700 times in the course of his years with DE / OM.⁷¹ During a semi-structured interview, JP recounted the story of a young girl whose release from possession 'by evil' was, he believes, linked directly to her viewing of *Karunamayudu*. The ministry team of which he was a part that night was unaware that a girl named M had been left locked up in her house by her family while they went to watch the film approximately a quarter to half a mile away. Nevertheless, she had been watching the movie at a distance through a small window. During the scene of Jesus' temptation, there is a shot where, with the thrust of his arm, he tells Satan to go away. Precisely during that scene, the girl reportedly began to shout in the house. After being prayed over by JP and other team members, she found relief and then reportedly stated that this god, and JP pointed as if to the film, was able to release her instantly when others could not. According to JP her parents had taken her to over 1000 shrines in search of relief, but now they invited him to come and pray with her. The whole family, approximately sixty-eight people by JP's recollection, then bowed down in front of the ministry team. Upon entering the house he claims to have found it full of garlanded stones, daubed with ash or other pigments. He does not know whether all sixty-eight converted to Christianity, but he gave me the name of the pastor of the congregation where she and her parents still attend in Karnataka state.⁷²

I was not in a position to corroborate this account by visiting the girl and her family, or those who purportedly converted to Christianity as a result of the events recounted above. There are numerous variables that could have been at play. It is, nevertheless, a rare example of reception in which a film is attributed with a kind of spiritual agency for setting off a chain of events that led to her reported relief. According to JP it was the film that generated a reaction from the girl, but she only found relief after being prayed for by the ministry team members. A comprehensive study of the film's reception would need to interrogate such accounts.

5.2 Village vs. city viewers

Generally speaking, exhibitors of *Karunamayudu* contend that village viewers approach the film differently than city dwellers. Without going into detail, the

⁷¹ JP, interview by the author, 15 February 2006, Secunderabad, India.

⁷² Ibid.

exhibitors surveyed suggest that viewers in the city have tended to be aloof, suspicious of exhibitors' intentions, educated, busy and argumentative. They also have tended to be critical of the quality of *Karunamayudu*, and less prone to watch it for the duration before wandering off. The aloofness exhibitors have noted among city dwellers is generally demonstrated by a comparative lack of hospitality and freedom to express their emotions. Furthermore, some viewers in cities reportedly suspect DE / OM staff of wanting to convert them (M23; F21) or make a commission from showing the film (M203). Both male and female exhibitors noted that viewers in cities and towns tended to be more literate. City viewers tend to view the film primarily as entertainment, a 'social movie' or a 'just a film' story, not as a 'serious' (M1) or a spiritual film (M2).

Villagers, by contrast, have reportedly been more prone to welcome DE / OM teams, to help with setting up for the film, and to invite team members into their homes (usually for prayer). Indeed, when discussing the difference in reception patterns between village and city dwellers, team members have given as much attention to the way they personally have been received as to the film's reception.⁷³

5.3 Religions and reception

For the most part, the exhibitors I consulted affirmed that viewers' responses to the film were influenced by their religious backgrounds, but not all offered examples of how this perceived influence played out. One denied that religious background had any influence on reception at all, since 'all religious people think Jesus was a good man and great prophet, *avatar*, etc'. (F25) Similarly, another argued that religious backgrounds did not influence viewer response since he had witnessed a Hindu, Muslim and Sikh all place their faith in Christ (M31). A third claimed that questions about religious background were not relevant because viewers simply treated *Karunamayudu* 'as a film' (M210). Several people have reportedly refused to watch *Karunamayudu* because they felt that doing so would be a betrayal of their religion (F57), or that the screening was in opposition to their religion (M40). On the other

⁷³ This openness on the part of villagers may simply reflect their general hospitality and should not automatically be assumed to reflect a positive attitude toward the film.

hand, a couple exhibitors suggested that religious backgrounds at times inhibited response to the film in that some viewers were afraid to admit publicly that they were drawn to Jesus, for fear of rejection by their families (F4, 14). A number have been suspicious that it is a 'conversion film' (M2). By contrast, for some Christians, screening *Karunamayudu* has functioned as a stimulus for 'rededicating' their lives to Christ (M203).

5.4 Jesus and other gods

Perhaps the most significant dynamic to emerge from exhibitors' accounts of reception, however, was that screenings of *Karunamayudu* have prompted many viewers to draw comparisons between their own gods or religious traditions and Jesus or Christianity (F37, 39). Some Naxalites have reportedly compared Jesus to the communist revolutionaries Marx, Mao, and Lenin (M185).⁷⁴ One exhibitor noted that a Hindu viewer had pointed out that the Christians' God (Jesus) is 'a shepherd for sheep, but our god (Hindu) [is a] shepherd for cow[s]!' (F33). Another viewer reportedly observed that like Jesus, Krishna's birth was accompanied by the death of young children (M223). Other viewers have been known to compare Jesus to Rama (M161, 171), Vishnu (M152), Shankar (M133), Brahma (M69) and Buddha (M137, 203). In Bengal, one exhibitor noted that after watching the film, some viewers claimed that Jesus was like Lokenath, in that he, too, rose from the dead (M188).⁷⁵ Several viewers have apparently drawn comparisons between Jesus and Sai Baba in that both worked powerful miracles (M14), their teachings are very similar (M203) and Sai Baba also is said to have risen from the dead (M13).⁷⁶ As one might expect in a context where gods abound, some viewers have recognized Jesus as another *avatar* of Brahma (M92, 116). Like other gods, he came to be born on earth (M149).

By contrast, however, some viewers have reportedly noted that the Jesus of *Karunamayudu* differs from the Hindu gods in significant ways. Unlike Rama, he

⁷⁴ The Naxalites were a revolutionary movement related to the communist party. Biplab Dasgupta, *The Naxalite Movement* (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1974); Rabindra Ray, *The Naxalites and Their Ideology* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁷⁵ Baba Lokenath is a Hindu saint.

⁷⁶ Apparently one viewer claimed that Sai Baba was greater than Jesus (M172).

does not fight, for example (M171). Like Krishna, Jesus came to save people and destroy enemies, but his pain and suffering is different from other gods and goddesses (M125). Furthermore, Jesus is more powerful and real than other gods (M62). He is the only God who rose from the dead (M80), and is 'the only loving God who even forgives his enemy' (M28). Another viewer is reported to have alleged that other gods did not face such kind of difficult or painful life like Jesus' (F61). One woman claimed that he 'is the only who died for our sin' (F40). According to this same group of exhibitors, Muslims adamantly reject that Jesus was, or is God and have allegedly been known to say that 'it is only [a] film', Jesus did not die (M1), nor did he rise from the dead (M78). One exhibitor reported that some Muslim women have refused to watch the movie at all (M162).

6. Conclusion

Media scholar Ien Ang has asserted that accounts of reception are never 'innocent'.⁷⁷ My appropriation of multiple sources does not render this study innocent, but such a strategy made it possible to produce a thicker account than either an interpretation of the text or my own observations alone could have provided. The aggregate evidence derived from multiple sources resists hasty assumptions about the ways in which people from different religious traditions might engage with *Karunamayudu*. It also raises important questions for further consideration. Both of the men who spoke to me about the film's cinematic release suggested by their comments that the anomaly in the film's early reception was not its widespread popularity, but that many Christians overcame their traditional apprehensions about the cinema in order to see it. Given the reported apprehensions about cinema attendance among many Indian Christians, the film's current appropriation for witness by select Christian communities in India raises important questions about how they negotiate the religious significance of film. What exactly do they hope to avoid by not going to the cinema? Why do they endorse a movie about Jesus produced by people from outside

⁷⁷ Ien Ang, *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences for a Postmodern World* (London: Routledge, 1996), 56.

their faith community or theological tradition? What influence, if any, do theological traditions have on these decisions?

Bishop J suggested that some viewers approached the screening of *Karunamayudu* in cinemas in a similar fashion to the way they approached temple deities, expecting 'something good to come of it'. These observations corroborate Ashish Rajadhyaksha's argument, summarized in chapter 3, that under D.G. Phalke's direction the possibility of having visual encounters with 'India's gods' was transferred to the cinematic medium. Do Christian film evangelists consider the possibility that some viewers may approach *Karunamayudu* from such a perceptual framework? If so, what bearing, if any, does such a possibility have on the way film evangelists interpret responses to the film? Some viewers compared Jesus to the deities with which they were familiar. Others found that Jesus' story as recounted in the film challenged their perceptions of how deities operate in the world of humans. For example, what kind of God would suffer like Jesus did? Both Bishop J and Rev MK noted that some viewers converted to Christianity after seeing the film in cinemas, but there is too little evidence currently available to determine whether said converts articulated that experience in terms that Christian film evangelists might expect.

Given the complexities that have yet to be interrogated in the reception of *Karunamayudu*, it would be disingenuous to assert that direct causal connections can be made between specific religious or theological traditions and its reception. The particularities and nuances of this account, however, serve notice that the careful work of collecting and comparing empirical data from a variety of sources is critical for a judicious understanding of how the film has been appropriated in daily life. Film evangelists, as well as scholars of film, religion, and theology will add credibility to their respective accounts by attending to such details.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Implications

1. Introduction

This study's analysis of *Karunamayudu*'s production, content, distribution, and exhibition has turned on two main questions: What religious traditions and experiences have informed *Karunamayudu*'s production, content, distribution and reception? How has this film been appropriated by producers, distributors, and viewers? In this chapter I turn to consider a third and concluding question: How does such an understanding of the history of *Karunamayudu* (1978), arguably India's best-known Jesus film, contribute to our understanding of the tangled relationship between film, religion, and theology? My answer is not straightforward because the implications of such an account are multiple. The bulk of this chapter, therefore, consists of a review of my findings and their implications for some of main fields of inquiry that intersect in this account. I suggest in conclusion, however, that this account highlights the need for a robust theoretical framework with which to map the multiple contingencies that shape film's relationship to religion and theology.

2. Review

I began this study by discussing three fields of scholarship with which it has the most in common. They included analyses of film, religion, and theology, Jesus in film, and religion in Indian cinema. I demonstrated that much of the discussion to date, with the obvious exception of the literature on religion in Indian cinema, has been decidedly Eurocentric, if not oriented specifically to the American context. Furthermore, I noted that contributors to the discussion have tended to treat films

either as akin to literary texts or as cultural products that mirror the contexts—primarily Western contexts—in which they were produced.

In keeping with more recent developments in the field, however, this study has turned attention to film's relationship to theology and religion beyond Western borders and acknowledged the need for attention to, and insights from, religious and theological sources other than the Western Christian theological traditions out of which the discussion has grown. Furthermore, it represents a growing resolve to incorporate the vagaries of human encounters with film into our understanding of a film's religious or theological significance. As I suggested in chapter 2, the discussion of film, religion, and theology has much to gain by asking questions of concern to media anthropologists; in particular, the social significance of films and how their perceived value, meaning, or religious and theological significance can change from one context to another. Therefore, instead of analyzing *Karunamayudu* (1978) strictly as the product of culture or as a text to be deciphered, I employed both qualitative and quantitative research methods to produce and analyze a 'thickly described' account of the film's journey from its production to current reception.¹

To the best of my knowledge, the multi-disciplinary approach I took in constructing and analyzing the history of *Karunamayudu* has few precedents. In the following paragraphs, I review my findings, the challenges I encountered, and some suggestions for future research that have emerged from this study. My comments follow the chronological structure of the account, and the order in which I reviewed the various bodies of literature at the outset of this project.

3. Implications for the study of film, religion, and theology

This project began as an attempt to trace religious and theological influences on production, content, distribution, and reception of *Karunamayudu*. I soon discovered,

¹ The concept of 'thick description' is attributed to Clifford Geertz, but this particular phrase is borrowed from William A. Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture: The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 15. Alternatively, one might call it a 'theologically informed' history. Terry Lindvall, 'Hollywood Chronicles: Toward an Intersection of Film History and Church History,' In *Reframing Theology and Film*, edited by Robert K. Johnston (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 127, 131.

however, what Clive Marsh has observed; tracking and identifying influences such as religious and theological traditions was more difficult than commonly thought.² As with cultural and ideological criticism, the challenge was to find reproducible evidence of intangible influences. It became apparent rather quickly that there was more evidence of the *negotiation* of religious and theological traditions in the film's history than there was of their influence.³ Granted, in Western contexts where Christianity—however secularized—has dominated cultural life, it may be easier to make a case for its general influence on media products like film. Where multiple traditions are at work, however, attempts to distinguish the influence of one tradition over another can be more complicated. Consequently, I suggest that this study's most significant contribution to the discussion of film, religion, and theology is the attention it draws to the contingencies implicit in that relationship at every stage in a film's life.

3.1 Production

In chapters 3 and 4 I provided what may be the most detailed account of *Karunamayudu's* production history currently available, and discussed the negotiation of Christianity and Hinduism as a primary factor in its composition.⁴ The religious or theological significance of the film, therefore, cannot be attributed to a single tradition but a fusion of religious, theological and cinematic traditions.⁵ Put differently, the evidence collected in this study suggests that the religious and theological significance of a given film may be fruitfully interrogated by asking what was at stake in its production. Richard Maltby's analysis of Cecil B. DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1927) provides an excellent example of such a study. Maltby deliberately eschewed a concern for the film's aesthetics and 'thematic discourses' in

² Clive Marsh, 'On Dealing with What Films Actually Do to People,' in *Reframing Theology and Film*, ed. Robert K. Johnston (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 150.

³ Italics mine.

⁴ See chapters 3 and 4.

⁵ Such nuances may call the film's orthodoxy into question for some viewers. At the same time, a recognition of the negotiations involved in making this film might also call into question the parameters of orthodoxy itself.

favour of analyzing its relationship to 'other ideological apparatuses and institutions'.⁶ He concluded that the making of the film was meant to encourage a 'mutually supportive relationship' between America's film industry and its liberal Protestant churches.⁷ This study of *Karunamayudu* suggests that a similar strategy was at work in its production history. When the administration of Amruthavani decided to collaborate with Hindu filmmakers in the production of the film, they were attempting to do more than ensure that Jesus be represented faithfully on South Indian's cinema screens. They were also fulfilling a papal mandate to build bridges to the communications industries by supporting 'worthwhile' film projects.⁸

A film's religious or theological significance in the production stage may therefore have as much to do with its influence on those involved, the social relationships formed, and the resources exploited in its composition, as it does with the development of its content. Questions about a director's intentions need not be concerned only with evaluating how successfully a film transmits its producers' intended meaning to viewers. They may also be directed toward understanding the discourses in which, and out of which, the film has developed. Consider that prior to commencing the project Coelho was apprehensive about the capacity of Indian cinema to do justice to the story of Christ. Although his aesthetic expectations for the film were never fulfilled, he eventually described the significance of his involvement with the project in terms of its contribution to his own spiritual development.⁹ Furthermore, the film's positive reception softened his evaluation of the film and of its viewers, and he conceded that although in his view the film was 'mediocre', it resonated with Indian viewers—'*our* people', to use his words—in a way that Western films could not.¹⁰ Similarly, what began for Chander as a career move

⁶ Richard Maltby, '*The King of Kings* and the Czar of All the Rushes: The Propriety of the Christ Story,' *Screen* 31, no. 2 (1990): 189.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁸ *Inter Mirifica*, Par. 14, in Walter M. Abbott, S.J., ed. *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press; America Press; Association Press, 1966), 319-331. According to Coelho, *Inter Mirifica* informed Balaguer's interest in the Christ film project. Christopher Coelho, interview by author, 16 Nov 2006, Secunderabad, Andhra Pradesh.

⁹ For a review of the details of the dream that he attributes with helping him to reconcile his disappointment with the outcome of the film, see chapter 3.

¹⁰ *Italics mine.* Christopher Coelho, 'How Hindus Filmed the Life of Christ,' *Action*, January (1980): 19.

ostensibly became an act of devotion to Jesus. Such shifts, I suggest, are as indicative of the religious or theological significance of a film as its content or effects.

3.2 Content

My review of *Karunamayudu*'s content brought into sharp relief a number of the challenges and benefits that K. Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake have suggested can accompany the analysis of non-Western films, especially by non-Western critics.¹¹ I mention briefly a few of their observations that resonate with the outcomes of this project.

As a Western Caucasian male, and despite my childhood in Africa, studying this film provided the opportunity, Gokulsing and Dissanayake's words, to see my own Western culture with 'fresh eyes'.¹² I was introduced to 'thought-worlds and performance-worlds of other traditional arts' and therefore to Indian aesthetics.¹³ The process also introduced me to a cultural and religious ethos with which I had previously been unfamiliar, not to mention new symbolic regimes, musical dynamics, narrative strategies, and cinematic conventions. The biases and nuances of Western culture and scholarship became more obvious. Furthermore, as Gokulsing and Dissanayake have noted about the study of Indian film generally, this project involved learning to reconsider issues as secularization, westernization, gender issues, and inter-religious dialogue, to name but a few.¹⁴

This opportunity to consider the discussion of film, religion, and theology from a different vantage point prompts me to suggest that the discussion of film's relationship to religion and theology should continue to develop along two

¹¹ Unless otherwise stated, the benefits and challenges mentioned in this section are drawn from, Gokulsing and Dissanayake, *Indian Popular Cinema: A Narrative of Cultural Change*, 9-13.

¹² Ibid., 13.

¹³ Ibid., 12.

¹⁴ Gokulsing and Dissanayake, 11. Additionally, I recommend as complementary introductions to the dynamics of Indian cinema, Gayatri Chatterjee, 'Designing a Course in Religion and Cinema in India,' in *Teaching Religion and Film*, ed. Gregory J. Watkins, Teaching Religious Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Philip Lutgendorf, 'Is There an Indian Way of Filmmaking?,' *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 10, no. 3 (2006).

complementary trajectories. On the one hand, the future depth and breadth of the discussion will depend in large part on the contributions of critics in non-Western cultures who will analyze films from within their own contexts. Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims, as well as adherents to tribal religions all have insights to offer this discussion. On the other hand, based on my own experiences in the course of this project I suggest that the continued attention of Western critics to non-Western contexts can also stimulate an intellectual cross-pollination beneficial to the conversation, if only to generate correctives. My handicaps as a Westerner—both culturally and linguistically—were at times advantageous because, as one Indian scholar suggested to me, I saw things differently and raised questions that might not otherwise have surfaced by researchers within his particular community..

The study of film in alternate cultural contexts can also alert us to the political dynamics in film's relationship to theology and religion. Granted, scholars of Western Jesus films have highlighted this dynamic in the history of the genre for some time.¹⁵ As Ravi Vasudevan has argued, however, debates over the significance of Indian film styles are often grounded in differing political perspectives about modernity and national identity in India.¹⁶ The debates in *Karunamayudu*'s history about how to 'Indianise' Jesus corroborate Vasudevan's claim. Although Coelho's direction notes indicate that he had no intention of making Jesus European, his comments about the backwardness of Indian culture in his review of *Karunamayudu* reflect aspirations for a modern India that had yet to be fulfilled.¹⁷ By contrast, Chander, whose family had a long history in the regional politics of South India may not have been as keen as Coelho to see India through the same modernising lens. Recognizing the interplay of such dynamics in the history of a single film encourages more judicious assessments of the demands that all films place on viewers, as well as the way people might incorporate films into the warp and woof of daily life and religious practice. Alternatively, by highlighting such transnational—or transregional—dynamics in the history of *Karunamayudu*, this study serves as a

¹⁵ See, for example, Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans, *Biblical Epics: Sacred Narrative in the Hollywood Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993); Richard Walsh, *Reading the Gospels in the Dark* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003).

¹⁶ Ravi Vasudevan, *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*, Oxford India Paperbacks (New Delhi; Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1-6.

¹⁷ Coelho, 'How Hindus Filmed the Life of Christ,' 16.

reminder that the discussion of film, religion, and theology is never determined entirely by a single cultural context.

3.3 *Distribution and Exhibition*

If the content of *Karunamayudu* highlights the need to be attentive to transnational elements in film's relationship to religion and theology, its distribution and exhibition history highlights the complex relationship between theological perspectives and communication theories that can shape the way that people use films in daily life. The producers of *Karunamayudu*, including Fr Christopher Coelho, seemed content to let it be a commercial product in hopes that it would inspire devotion to Jesus on its own. John Gilman, and numerous film evangelists after him, however, deployed the film in as a tool to accomplish a particular objective. It does not follow, therefore, that people who share a common theological confession will understand media in precisely the same way. Gilman's appropriation of the film was shaped by other factors, including his faith in film as a means of communicating biblical revelation and visualizing the Gospel for local cultures.¹⁸

As I argued in chapter 6, Coelho and Chander demonstrated what cultural critic James Carey has described as an understanding of communication as ritual; that is, they both seem to have understood the film as part of a broader discourse about Jesus in the Indian context.¹⁹ Gilman and his associates have also celebrated the Indianness of *Karunamayudu*, yet their enthusiasm for the film reflects what Carey has referred to as an instrumental view of communication, as borne out by their repeated references to *Karunamayudu* as an effective tool.²⁰ Carey's claim that an emphasis on the instrumentality of media has historically been associated with efforts to expand God's kingdom, is corroborated by Gilman's appropriation of

¹⁸ See Gilman on the visual and divine revelation in chapter 6, 136.

¹⁹ James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, Repr. ed., Media and Popular Culture; 1 (New York; London: Routledge, 1992), 18. This tendency, at least on Coelho's part, may be attributable in part to a deliberate decision from the Vatican to speak of media as *social communication*. See, Pope Paul II, 'Decree on the Instruments of Social Communication, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J. (New York: Guild Press, 1963).

²⁰ Italics mine.

Karunamayudu.²¹ By contrast, although Roman Catholicism as a movement is hardly exempt from charges of empire building, Roman Catholics have tended to celebrate the film's allusions to Hindu mythology as a way of dodging charges of proselytization and making the film's portrayal of Jesus relevant to Indian viewers.²²

Theories of communication and media can also inform one's perceptions of viewers. As I noted when discussing the production history of the film, Coelho doubted from the beginning whether Indian cinema was up to the task of representing Jesus.²³ By implication, he was not sure that Indian viewers would appreciate the cinematic sophistication with which he wished to tell Jesus' story. By contrast, John Gilman made the decision to appropriate *Karunamayudu* for Christian evangelism precisely because of the effects he had observed the film to have on viewers. Such nuances of perception must be accounted for in a comprehensive analysis of a film's religious or theological significance.

3.4 Reception

Drawing on two accounts of the film's initial reception in commercial cinemas, on personal observation of three public screenings of the film, semi-structured interviews, and feedback from over three hundred of the film's recent exhibitors, I provided in chapter 7 one of the first reception studies of a non-Western Jesus film. Although somewhat limited in scope, this aspect of the study was an attempt to give an account of the experiences and interpretations of viewers' encounters with *Karunamayudu*.²⁴ Put differently, it involved analyzing 'what films do to people' as well as what people do with film'.²⁵ Space and time do not allow for an in-depth discussion of how my findings might inform ongoing inquiries about the dynamics of

²¹ Carey. 16. In a similar vein, see John P. Ferré, 'The Media of Popular Piety.' In *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture*, edited by Jolyon Mitchell and Sophia Marriage (London: T and T Clark, 2003), 83-92.

²² 'India,' *The Tablet*, 9 February (1980): 142.

²³ Christopher Coelho, 'How Hindus Filmed the Life of Christ', *Action* (January 1980), 16.

²⁴ Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2000), 1.

²⁵ Clive Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment: Film's Challenge to Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2004), ix.

viewers' interpretations, affective experiences, or appropriations of film, or how those response might best be theorized using categories such as meaning-making, ritual, 'cinematics' and, more recently, 'sensory criticism'.²⁶ This account's contributions to the discussion of film reception are more modest.

The conditions in which *Karunamayudu* continues to be screened serve as a reminder to scholars of film and religion that film reception studies cannot presume the conditions of the multiplex or the home theatre to be universal paradigms. Drawing parallels between church buildings and cinema-houses may be instructive for comparing film and religion in Western contexts, but not in the villages or urban slums I visited.²⁷ Even drive-in theatres share few parallels with the open-air contexts in which *Karunamayudu* is often screened. As the discussion of film, religion, and theology develops, therefore, contributors will do well to attend carefully to the spaces in which people engage with film.

This study also introduces accounts of Jesus film reception from non-Western viewers who represent multiple religious traditions, including Hinduism, Islam and Christianity.²⁸ Their varied responses to the film, especially as noted by the film's multiple exhibitors, reinforce media scholar Ien Ang's observation that no account of reception—including this one—is 'innocent'.²⁹ Viewers of *Karunamayudu* have brought their own agendas and histories to their encounters with the film. One viewer, whose comments are recorded in chapter 7, compared the story of Jesus to that of Krishna. Some Hindu viewers have reportedly approached the screening of *Karunamayudu* expecting a *darshan* encounter with Jesus.³⁰ Alternatively, some

²⁶ See, respectively, Charlotte Haines Lyon, 'Kill Bill Volume 2: A Film Worthy of Meaning Making?', *Participations* 5, no. 1 (2008). http://www.participations.org/Volume%205/Issue%201%20-%20special/5_01_haineslyon.htm (accessed 25 Feb 2009); John Lyden, *Film as Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); S. Brent Plate, 'Religious Cinematics: The Immediate Body in the Media of Film,' *Postscripts* 1.2 / 1.3 (2005); Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr., 'Teaching Religion and Film: A Fourth Approach,' in *Teaching Religion and Film*, ed. Greg Watkins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

²⁷ When Vijay Mishra refers to Bollywood films as temples of desire, he does not likely have in mind a metaphor that could be used interchangeably with a Christian church building. Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002).

²⁸ See the last section of chapter 7.

²⁹ Ien Ang, *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences for a Postmodern World* (London: Routledge, 1996), 45, 66.

³⁰ For more on *darshan*, see chapter 4.

Muslim viewers have reportedly dismissed *Karunamayudu* as just another film—in other words, not historical—on the premise that Jesus was not God.³¹

My observations of three screenings of *Karunamayudu*, combined with feedback from its recent exhibitors, also complicated some of the enthusiastic claims made by Gilman and associates about the film's reception. The viewers I observed, for example, did not respond as emotionally or as viscerally as promoters of the film had suggested they often do. Furthermore, feedback from some of the film's exhibitors about patterns in the film's reception generated a more nuanced account of the film's reception among viewers from various religious traditions than has been available from DI to date.

To summarize, this account of *Karunamayudu* from production to reception demonstrates the complexities involved in attempting to articulate the influence of religious and theological influences on a film, or perceptions of a film. A single account from my field notes illustrates the complex matrix of film, religion, and theology with which this study has been concerned.

A few days after attending my third public screening of the film I returned to the same community (site C in chapter 7) and, with the permission of community leaders, carried out several semi-structured interviews with local residents. The leaders insisted that I begin by discussing the film with them and invited me to join them in the porch area of the temple to their local goddess. In an effort to learn how they may have perceived Jesus in relation to other screen heroes I began by asking one of the men to name his favourite movie star. He mentioned Chiranjeevi, currently one of Telugu cinema's most celebrated actors. Moments later, another man in the group interrupted our conversation. Recalling the scene where Jesus can be seen from a distance walking on water, he told me that Jesus in that scene is like Chiranjeevi. The water all around him, by contrast, is like Jesus.

If one accepts that theological discourse includes all forms of god-talk, then in that single assertion this informant made a claim about Jesus that was ostensibly theological and could be interpreted in at least two ways. One might read it as an assertion about the supremacy of Christ over all other gods, or at least screen idols; it

³¹ See the last section of chapter 7.

would not be surprising for Christians to assume such an interpretation. Alternatively, it could be understood as an allusion to Hindu mythology or *bhajans* (praise songs) in which the metaphor of the ocean is used to refer to Brahman, the source of all existence, the place to which all religions run, or any number of deities, including Krishna and Vishnu.³² Given the various sources employed by this man—a contemporary Telugu movie personality widely known for his ability to dance and fight, a thirty-year-old movie about Christ featuring crude special effects and (deliberately or not) an allusion to a central metaphor in Hindu tradition³³—it is difficult to distinguish the influence of one tradition from another. Consequently, it raises a number of important questions that this study only begins to address: Is it possible to identify a primary theological or religious influence in such a negotiation? Is such a distinction necessary? If so, to what end? These are questions that could be posed with respect to any aspect of the film's history. The complexities that surface in this one account, however, also indicate how far the discussion of film's relationship to theology and religion has to go in understanding how that relationship is negotiated in a variety of cultural contexts.

In the face of such complexities, therefore, this study is best understood as an exploratory probe, the most significant contribution of which may be to highlight some of the challenges that lie ahead for those keen to move the conversation beyond its roots in mid-twentieth century Western culture. Having summarized in broad strokes some of the outcomes of this study, I now turn to consider its implications for two other bodies of literature I discussed at the outset: scholarship on Jesus in film and religion in Indian cinema.

³² Alternatively, it could refer to the 'ocean of existence' which humans must navigate in their quest for freedom. A line from a hymn quoted in David Smith, *The Dance of Siva: Religion, Art and Poetry in South India* (Cambridge University Press), 104.

³³ It is not without reason, perhaps, that the Hindi title for *Karunamayudu* is *Daya Sagar*, which in Hindi means 'Ocean of Mercy'. This man may have been aware of the Hindi title, but the version he had seen several nights before was in Telugu. Interviews by the author, 04 December, Bangalore, India. Although DE/OM personnel were responsible for the logistical details of screening the movie, in this particular instance they had agreed to do nothing more than project the film. To the best of my knowledge, there were no preliminary prayers or testimonies, and there was no running commentary by film evangelists. Following the screening there was no invitation for prayer or discussion. This person informed me that he had not even seen the whole movie on the night it was screened. Hence, this excerpt from an interview provides a glimpse of the range of resources on which people may draw without input from evangelists.

4. Implications for the study of Jesus films

From an archival perspective, this study contributes to scholarship on Jesus in film by providing one of the first detailed and 'theologically informed' histories of a non-Western Jesus film.³⁴ Myriad essays on Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) notwithstanding, it may also be one of the first in-depth analyses of a single Jesus film's journey from its production to recent reception.³⁵

The details of *Karunamayudu*'s journey, however, complicate some long-standing assumptions that have marked analyses of the genre. In contrast to predictions from some Western scholars and film critics, the production and reception histories of *Karunamayudu* indicate that biblical spectacles have not lost their appeal, nor are they only meaningful for Christians who know Jesus' story.³⁶ Likewise, the details of the film's story complicate any assumption that making and showing Jesus films in non-Western contexts is always related to Christian proselytization or the agendas of Western Christians. Not only did Vijay Chander, who played Jesus and produced *Karunamayudu*, come from Brahmin stock, he has insisted that the film was not made for evangelistic purposes.³⁷ Likewise, every subsequent Jesus film produced in South India has been a commercial endeavour, not the work of evangelical Christians.³⁸

Given the Indian context in which the film was produced and continues to be screened, it raises different theological questions than most Jesus films have in the West. Whereas in the West, the question of how to present both the humanity and deity of Jesus has been a perennial challenge to producers of Jesus films, Indian cinema has a long history of portraying deities and holy men on screen. The notion

³⁴ See Terry Lindvall, 'Hollywood Chronicles: Toward an Intersection of Film History and Church History', in *Reframing Theology and Film*, ed. Robert K. Johnston (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

³⁵ A noteworthy exception, perhaps, is Richard Maltby's discussion of Cecil B. DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1927).

³⁶ James M. Wall, 'Biblical Spectaculars and Secular Man', in *Celluloid and Symbols*, ed. John Charles Cooper and Carl Skrade (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970). 52-54. It is also important to recognize that Wall's assertion was made in the context of Western culture and framed by a Western conception of secularization which is no longer perceived as universally applicable.

³⁷ R. S. Sugirtharajah, 'Indian Cowboy, Hindu Christ', *One World* 49 (1979), 19.

³⁸ At least two movies of Jesus' life have been produced in South India since the release of *Karunamayudu*: *Santi Sandesham* (2004) and *Mulla Kireetam* (2006).

of Jesus as an *avatar* has often been proposed frequently by Indian theologians as a model for Indian Christology.³⁹ Based on feedback from the film's exhibitors, however, I suggest that the scandalous aspect of *Karunamayudu*'s portrait of Jesus—especially, perhaps, for Hindu viewers—is that although divine, he suffered as a human being. As Robin Boyd has noted, the notion of *Brahman* suffering is virtually inconceivable since '*Brahman* is *Ananda*, bliss', since 'the Hindu doctrine of *karma* cannot be reconciled with redemptive suffering' because suffering is understood in a karmic framework as the outcome of evil deeds.⁴⁰ Furthermore, as Freek Bakker has suggested, the Jesus of *Karunamayudu* may best be understood in keeping with the suffering servant central to so much of Dalit theology.⁴¹

Seeing an 'Indianized' Jesus also serves as a reminder that his cinematic manifestations, even the 'non-American' ones, are culturally informed and situated.⁴² An Indian Jesus presents viewers accustomed to seeing a Caucasian Christ on screen with the opportunity to encounter him as a stranger to Western culture. Alternatively, Indian viewers may, for the first time, perceive him as intimately familiar with their own context. That Jesus was neither from Britain nor Bombay, but can be recognized on screen in either location, also invites further reflection on the trans-national dynamics, sources, and effects of the cinematic Christ on how viewers perceive and his significance for their daily lives. This study can only point to those negotiations, however, not adequately address them. On a different critical plane, considering Jesus in Indian cinema is also an invitation to consider what 'parochialisms and provincialisms' critics may need to shed as discussions of film, religion, and theology develop in scope and become more global in orientation.⁴³

Thinking about Jesus as an Indian holy man or guru also invites us to reconsider the purpose of his mission and teachings. To suggest, as I did in chapters 4 and 5, that *Karunamayudu* might best be classified as a devotional film rather than

³⁹ Robin H. S. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1969), 80-81.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁴¹ Freek L. Bakker, 'Shanti Sandesham, a New Jesus Film Produced in India: Indian Christology in Pictures,' *Exchange* 36, no. (2007), 64. I provide an alternative reading below.

⁴² Richard Walsh, *Reading the Gospels in the Dark* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 182.

⁴³ K. Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake, *Indian Popular Cinema: A Narrative of Cultural Change*, Revised and Updated ed. (Stoke on Trent, UK: Trentham Books, 2004), 12.

a mythological could imply that as the film's protagonist, Jesus is a devotee who demonstrates unalterable devotion to his God.⁴⁴ It would be instructive, from this perspective, to compare *Karunamayudu*'s portrait of Christ with *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) and Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) in which Jesus is portrayed as a hesitant Messiah. Alternatively, the graphic portrayal of Jesus' suffering in *Karunamayudu* and his unwillingness to shy away from it, has much in common with the central character in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). Thinking of Jesus as devotee also raises the question of whether he was as concerned with teaching his disciples how to live with others as he was with accomplishing an atoning transaction for the sin of humanity. As Chander himself has noted, 'Christ's teachings are simple and people feel they can understand [them], but the whole problem comes [in] putting them in[to] practice'.⁴⁵ While one might find a Western portrait of Jesus as guru in George Stevens's epic *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), what sets *Karunamayudu* apart, is its portrayal of Jesus in that role from an Indian perspective.⁴⁶

Put differently, the history of *Karunamayudu* serves notice that as the analysis of non-Western Jesus films develops, critics will have to account for local modes of production, local theologies, events, perceptual frameworks, and culturally specific representations of Jesus. The story of *Karunamayudu* contained in this account is also a reminder that for several decades the cinematic Jesus has been alive and well outside the domain of Western cinema. *Karunamayudu*'s production history highlights the trans-national dynamics that have marked Indian cinema generally. As already noted, the way Jesus' portrait has been adapted in various cultures invites viewers and critics from each and every one to reconsider the blend of perceptual influences that inform their own perspectives of him.⁴⁷ It follows that evaluations of a film's portrayal of Jesus shaped primarily by the concerns of Western Christian traditions—including this one—are unlikely to be accepted as normative in non-Western contexts.

⁴⁴ This is not inconsistent with Hebrews 5:7-9 which describe Jesus' obedience and submission to God.

⁴⁵ Vijay Chander, interview with the author, 16 Nov 2006, Hyderabad, India.

⁴⁶ I return to a discussion of Jesus as guru below.

⁴⁷ Some of the material in the above paragraphs was drawn from Dwight Friesen, 'Karunamayudu: Seeing Christ Anew in Indian Cinema', in *Images of the Word: Hollywood's Bible and Beyond*, ed. David Shepherd (Atlanta: SBL, 2008), 188.

This study also contributes to scholarship on Jesus in film by providing one of the first reception studies of a non-Western Jesus film to incorporate responses from 'untutored' viewers.⁴⁸ By describing in some detail the outdoor spaces and dynamics in which *Karunamayudu* has been screened publicly, I introduced contextual variables to the study of Jesus film reception that have yet to be accounted for in critical studies of the genre. If Janet Staiger's optimistic agenda for reception studies is ever to be realized, studies like this may one day contribute to an updating of the Jesus film genre's history.⁴⁹

Should such a project ever be attempted, I suggest that contributors should take several factors into account. The first is that a number of movies of Jesus' life have been produced in South India over the last forty years.⁵⁰ It would be instructive for scholarship with an interest in Indian cinema history, Jesus in film, genre studies, or religion in Indian cinema, to conduct a historical and comparative analysis of these films and their various connections to the mythological and devotional films common to the region. Furthermore, despite the ubiquitous use of Jesus films for Christian evangelism in the twentieth century, this study highlights the lack of critical analyses of the practice in non-Western contexts. A distribution / exhibition study of both *Karunamayudu* and Campus Crusade for Christ International's 'JESUS film' on the scale of Martin Barker et al.'s reception study of *The Lord of the Rings* would yield a more comprehensive analysis of Jesus film evangelism than this study has to offer.⁵¹ Such an analysis could contribute to a number of closely related fields, including but not limited to, the study of global Christianity, the history of Christian mission, religious visual culture, and the study of religion in Indian cinema.

⁴⁸ Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 38, 48.

⁴⁹ This suggestion is derived from Janet Staiger who has argued that reception studies generally might result in the rewriting of cinema history and philosophy. *Ibid.*, 95. I suggest that it could and should also inform a rewriting of the history of film, religion, and theology.

⁵⁰ Although other films purportedly feature appearances of Jesus or scenes from his life, the following are full-length feature films of Jesus' life produced in South India: *Mulla Kireetam* (c. 1960s); *Jesus* (1973; dir. P.A. Thomas); *Karunamayudu* (1973; dir. A. Bhimsingh); *Shanti Sandesham* (2004; dir. P.C. Reddy); *Mulla Kireetam* (2006; dir. Raja Reddy).

⁵¹ Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs, *Watching the Lord of the Rings: Tolkien's World Audiences* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

5. Implications for the study of religion in Indian cinema

On a very general level, this account highlights the need for studies in the role Christianity has played in the history of Indian cinema. Indian cinema scholar Rachel Dwyer has noted that Christian men are often portrayed in Indian films as drunks or comics and Christian women either as professionals or as morally suspect. Places of Christian worship, on the other hand, are usually treated with respect—perhaps a nod to the influence of Christian educational institutions in the nation.⁵² Yet Gayatri Chatterjee has recalled that in a film by Guru Dutt, one of India's iconic directors, the hero is 'imagined as a crucified Christ'.⁵³ To the best of my knowledge, most references to Christianity in Indian cinema have been anecdotal. Except for ubiquitous references to the Jesus film that inspired D.G. Phalke, the father of Indian cinema, few if any references have been made in mainstream academic discussions of the industry to South India's Jesus films or the representations of Christ in Indian films. That said, recent mention of a Jesus film circulating in South India during the first decade of the twentieth century, serves as a reminder that there is still much to be learned about the genre's history in the industry.⁵⁴ By focusing on a South Indian film, this study makes a modest contribution toward such a development as well as discussions of religion and Indian cinema in South India.

In addition to its historical contributions, however, this study also provides a glimpse into discourses about cinema among Indian Christians. The apprehensions about cinema attendance and selective viewing practices I observed among the film exhibitors with whom I resided temporarily in Indian raise important questions about how and where such codes or values originate and are negotiated. Theologian and film critic Clive Marsh has recently suggested that 'Whatever people say they go to the cinema for, they often get more than they expect'.⁵⁵ It may be that it is precisely this unpredictable excess that some Indian Christians fear, or are at least have been

⁵² Rachel Dwyer, *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 143.

⁵³ The film was *Pyaasa* (1973). Gayatri Chatterjee, 'Designing a Course in Religion and Cinema in India,' in *Teaching Religion and Film*, ed. Gregory J. Watkins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 78.

⁵⁴ Umsima Shafiq, 'Forgotten Pioneer of Tamil Cinema', *Gulf Times Features*, 20 January 2008.

⁵⁵ Clive Marsh, 'On Dealing with What Films Actually Do to People,' in *Reframing Theology and Film*, ed. Robert K. Johnston (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 147.

warned to guard against. At the same time, I encountered no apprehensions among Christian exhibitors about screening *Karunamayudu*; indeed some exhibitors claimed to have watched it hundreds of times. Perhaps, as Indian media scholar Sham P. Thomas found in his analysis of television viewing habits among Marthoma Christians, the issue is one of control. Exhibitors of *Karunamayudu* may be less conservative in their media consumption in the privacy of their own homes where they have access to the remote.⁵⁶

With the production of *Karunamayudu*, the role of the Jesus film genre in Indian cinema came full circle. As noted in chapter 4, D.G. Phalke, the father of Indian cinema was reportedly inspired by a Jesus film to represent the gods, goddesses, and narratives of India's epics on the silver screen. The mythological genre and its offspring, the devotional film, in turn played a part in shaping the conventions and content of *Karunamayudu*.⁵⁷ Studying such circuits of cinematic influence might bear fruit in the form of a richer understanding of the transnational dimensions of the mythological and devotional genres in Indian cinema. What would it mean, for our understanding of the mythological film if Phalke was not only inspired by the *content* of the Jesus film he observed, but its *stylistic features* as well?⁵⁸

It is generally acknowledged that most of the literature on Indian cinema is concerned with Hindi films and the industry's relationship to Hinduism. Given the emphasis in the literature on the interplay in Indian cinema between the local and global, it would be instructive to understand how that dynamic plays out in relation to religion and theology. Is the relation between Hinduism and the industry as homogenous as is suggested? If, as so many Western critics have suggested, Western films of all genres are shaped by biblical, if not Christian worldviews, do those supposed connections survive their adaptations in the Indian context? If so, how? Furthermore, both in India and the West, there has been little exploration of the relationship between film and religion in daily life, or the relationship between film

⁵⁶ See Sham Padinjattethil Thomas, 'Prime Time and Prayer Time: Television, Religion and the Practices of Everyday Life of Marthoma Christians in Kerala, India' (Unpublished Dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 2005).

⁵⁷ See chapters 3 and 4.

⁵⁸ Italics mine.

and minority religions in those contexts.⁵⁹ Examinations of the negotiation of religion and film in all aspects of Indian cinema from production to reception would provide a more nuanced portrait of the industry and Indian culture.

6. Implications for understanding developments in Indian Christology

My primary objective in this study has been to identify and outline the theological and religious dynamics in the history of *Karunamayudu* in order to understand their implications for the discussion of film, religion, and theology. As the contingencies in this account suggest, one of the most significant risks for contributing critics is the temptation to identify religious and theological influences where they either do not exist or may not be acknowledged. Alternatively, the construction of this account has also highlighted the possibility that Western readers in particular might evaluate *Karunamayudu*'s portrait of Jesus from the perspective of Western Christologies and thereby fail to appreciate how the peoples of India might see him in the film.

In this section, therefore, I will discuss briefly how *Karunamayudu* may be understood as a contribution to Christological discourse in India. First I demonstrate how the dynamics of the film's history can serve as an introduction to some of the major trends in Indian Christian theology. Then I discuss briefly how the film visualizes a concept common to Indian Christology, the image of Jesus as *guru*.

6.1 Karunamayudu: an introduction to Indian Christology

I argued in chapter 5 that *Karunamayudu* depicts a 'hybrid' Jesus that incorporates into its portrayal of Jesus allusions to Hindu mythology and traits common to India's holy men. As the history of Jesus films in the West indicates, a general tendency among filmmakers to portray Jesus on film in keeping with local traditions and

⁵⁹ For example, Dalits and tribals.

mores is not uncommon.⁶⁰ Although the notion of an Indian movie of Jesus' life may be somewhat novel for some, and its fusion of Hindu and Christian motifs may raise suspicions of syncretism in some quarters, its treatment of Jesus' life reflects dynamics that have long shaped Indian Christian theology.

Discussions about the significance of Jesus/Christ in India are part of a broader conversation commonly referred to as Indian Christian theology (hereafter ICT), which has been described as the ongoing attempt to express 'in Indian language' the 'deepest Christian insights into the very nature and being of God, Christ, man and the world'.⁶¹ As noted in the discussion of Indian cinema in chapter 4, however, the concept of Indianness remains open to debate.⁶² Therefore, given the cultural, political, and religious diversity in the nation, there is no single 'Indian language' with which to theologize in India.⁶³ Like the terms 'religion' or 'Hinduism', the category of Indian Christian theology is, on closer examination, highly nuanced. That said, there have been some overriding trends in the discussion that, in my view, can also be observed in the history of *Karunamayudu*. In the next section I mention a few of the more obvious parallels.

6.2 Parallels between Karunamayudu's history and Indian Christian theology

One of the more obvious dynamics in *Karunamayudu*'s production history was the interaction between Hinduism and Christianity, as played out in the collaboration between Vijay Chander and Fr Christopher Coelho. Likewise, Christian theological

⁶⁰ See, for example, related sections in Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans, *Biblical Epics: Sacred Narrative in the Hollywood Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993); Paul Virgil McCracken Flesher and Robert Torrey, *Film & Religion: An Introduction* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007); Richard Walsh, *Reading the Gospels in the Dark* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003).

⁶¹ The abbreviation ICT is borrowed from Sanjay Paswan and Pramanshi Jaideva, 'Dalit Theology', in *Encyclopaedia of Dalits in India*, ed. Sanjay Paswan and Pramanshi Jaideva (Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2002), 69; Boyd, 260. For introductions to Indian Christian theology (ICT), see Robin H. S. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1969); Andrew Wingate, 'Indian Christianity', in *Jesus in History, Thought, and Culture: An Encyclopedia*, ed. J. L. Houlden (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2003).

⁶² See chapter 4 of this work.

⁶³ Felix Wilfred, *On the Banks of Ganges* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2002), 1-4.

discourse in India has been marked largely by a dialogue between the 'Brahmanic traditions' of Hinduism and Christianity;⁶⁴ and in the twentieth century, between Christianity and a Hinduism grappling with the implications of secularization and nationalist impulses.⁶⁵ Despite the emphasis on *Christian* insights in the term ICT, it should be noted that the initiation of theological conversations about Jesus/Christ in India, at least since the 19th century, has been attributed to Hindu rather than Christian thinkers.⁶⁶ Therein lies a major point of contention for India's Dalit theologians because Hinduism has been the primary proponent of the caste system that oppressed Dalits for centuries.⁶⁷ Furthermore, Dalits (and India's tribal peoples) have tended to reject the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon, preferring instead to worship their own local deities.⁶⁸ The tendency of Dalit theologians to distance their work from the category of ICT, therefore, complicates efforts to use the moniker as a general reference to Christian theologizing in India. In the face of such nuances it may seem inappropriate to continue using the phrase 'Indian Christian theology' without constant qualification. Nevertheless, I will continue to do so, on the understanding that I am referring specifically to all expressions of Christian insights—and more specifically the significance of Jesus/Christ—in India.

Karunamayudu's cynical portrayal of Jewish priests reflects a general aversion among Indian theologians to the 'dogmatic' and institutional aspects of religion, including but not limited to those of Western Christianity.⁶⁹ Furthermore, Chander's appeal to mystical experiences with Christ in order to explain his commitment to the film may reflect a propensity for 'direct experience' of God over dogma as a primary source of theology.⁷⁰ Likewise, Robin Boyd has observed that

⁶⁴ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 96.; Boyd.

⁶⁵ Boyd and Thomas. As theologian Sathianathan Clarke has suggested, the responsibility for this bias toward Hinduism may lie at the feet of Western Christians, since traditional Hinduism has rarely demonstrated an interest in engaging other religious traditions. Sathianathan Clarke, 'The Jesus of Nineteenth Century Indian Christian Theology,' *Studies in World Christianity* 5, no. 1 (1999).

⁶⁶ Ram Mohan Roy was especially influential from the outset. See Thomas, chapter 1. Italics mine.

⁶⁷ See John C. B. Webster, *Religion and Dalit Liberation: An Examination of Perspectives* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1999).

⁶⁸ Kancha Ilaiah, *Why I Am Not a Hindu* (Calcutta: Samya, 1996); Webster, *Religion and Dalit Liberation*.

⁶⁹ Boyd, 3, 247-248.

⁷⁰ Ibid., Cf., 3, 228-230.

Indian theologians have typically been more interested in the potential effects of Christ's indwelling than in whether or not he was a historic person.⁷¹ In my view Chander's hope that viewers would be drawn to Jesus' compassion as mediated through close-ups of his eyes reflects this interior impulse.⁷² Similarly, the emphasis on Jesus' compassion in the movie reflects the observation that Indian theologians have been more interested in 'the positive fact of God's glory and love than in the negative one of man's sin'.⁷³

Although the film clearly communicates that Jesus is God, its predominant emphasis on Jesus' compassion, its critique of institutional religion, and his willingness to break with cultural mores reflects an enduring fascination in India with Jesus' ethics.⁷⁴ The emergence of critical reflection on the significance of Jesus for India is often attributed to Ram Mohan Roy—commonly referred to as 'the father of modern India'—who promoted the ethics of Jesus as a model for reforming Indian society.⁷⁵ Similarly, Mohatma Gandhi is remembered for asserting that even if Jesus had never existed, he would still adhere to Jesus' teachings as found in the Sermon on the Mount.⁷⁶ The notion that Jesus is the fulfilment of the longings and desires inherent in Hindu traditions has also shaped Christological reflection in India. Some key proponents of this notion have included some of the more memorable names in the history of Indian Christian theology: Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-1884), Nehemiah Goreh (1825-95) and Brahmabandab Upadhyaya (1861-1907), to name but three.⁷⁷ Variations on the theme include Raimundo Panikkar's *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* that made the case for a relationship of 'mutual fecundation'

⁷¹ Boyd, 250.

⁷² Vijay Chander, interview with the author, 16 Nov 2006, Hyderabad, India.

⁷³ Boyd, 245.

⁷⁴ M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1969), 11.

⁷⁵ Boyd, 19, 20.; Roy's thin volume, *Precepts of Jesus*, was a collection of excerpts from Jesus' ethical teachings, similar to Thomas Jefferson's *The Life and Morals of Jesus*.

⁷⁶ M. Thomas Thangaraj, *The Crucified Guru: An Experiment in Cross-Cultural Christology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 72.

⁷⁷ Boyd, 37, 54-56, 64-69.

between the Hindu and Christian.⁷⁸ See also M.M. Thomas' *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* for a review of early exemplars of this approach.⁷⁹

Perhaps most significantly for this study, however, the attempt by *Karunamayudu*'s producers to portray Jesus in the Indian context represents an enduring commitment by Indian theologians to articulate his significance using terms, categories, and idioms common to India's cultures and religions.⁸⁰ Jesus has been portrayed as: a *satyagrahi* (one devoted to the Truth);⁸¹ an *avatar* (a manifestation of the divine);⁸² an *advaitin* (one who acknowledges a non-dual relationship with God); *bhodisatva* (a liberated soul); a sage, the way, the servant, the compassionate, and dancer, to name but a few motifs.⁸³ As noted in chapters 3 and 5, the making of *Karunamayudu* appears to have been informed by a similar agenda. The final title of the film ('Man of Compassion' [Telugu]; 'Ocean of Mercy' [Hindi]) is a phrase commonly attributed to Hindu gods and highlights an ideal common to a number of India's religious traditions.⁸⁴ A case could likely be made for parallels between the Jesus of *Karunamayudu* and any one of the motifs listed above. Nevertheless, I suggest that the film's portrait of Jesus has most in common with the figure of the *guru*.⁸⁵

⁷⁸ Raimundo Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism: Towards an Ecumenical Christophany*, Rev. and enl. ed. (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981), 12.

⁷⁹ M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1969); See also J. N. Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1913). These scholars' perceptions of Jesus/Christ's relationship to Indian religions has not always met with approval. One critic has referred to authors of such texts as 'mischievous Christian theologians'. Sita Ram Goel, *Jesus Christ: An Artifice for Aggression* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1994), 83.

⁸⁰ Boyd, 2-6.

⁸¹ Anton Wessels, *Images of Jesus: How Jesus Is Perceived and Portrayed in Non-European Cultures* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 137.

⁸² Volker Kuster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ: Intercultural Christology* (London: SCM, 2001), 91.

⁸³ For discussions of the last seven, see Amaladoss. To this list one could add many more titles, including, but not limited to: '*Sadhu ideal*', '*The Lord of Yoga*', '*The Ide of Christ as the Mother-Guru*'. See Plamthodathil S. Jacob, 'The Indigenous Christian Spirituality of Narayan Vaman Tilak,' in *Christianity Is Indian*, ed. Roger E. Hedlund (Delhi: SPCK, 2004), 23.

⁸⁴ The emphasis on Jesus' compassion also reflects the ideals of a number of religious traditions in India. Ibid; Dwight Friesen, 'Showing Compassion and Suggesting Peace in *Karunamayudu* an Indian Jesus Film,' *Studies in World Christianity* 14, no. 2 (2007).

⁸⁵ I have chosen not to debate whether *avatar* or *guru* is the more appropriate attribution for Jesus in the Indian context. For a discussion of divine descents as understood in South Indian traditions, see

6.3 Karunamayudu: visualizing Jesus as guru

In this section I argue that *Karunamayudu* makes an important contribution to Indian Christological reflection by visualizing Jesus as guru. Although the concept of Jesus as guru is common to Indian Christological discourse and corporate worship, M. Thomas Thangaraj has argued that Indian theologians have generally perceived the motif as 'inadequate for a fully developed christology'.⁸⁶ Perhaps, he suggests, their reticence reflects a tendency to work with a Christology inherited from Western missionaries for whom 'the christological task' has consisted primarily of 'manipulating the existing Hindu thought-forms to express the unchanging and / eternal truths concerning Jesus the Christ'.⁸⁷

According to Thangaraj, the concept of guru has been used to discuss Jesus either as an enlightened—even divine—teacher, or in incarnational terms as an alternative to the concept of *avatar*; a manifestation or descent of God.⁸⁸ Some have also employed the term to address the significance of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, priests, and ministers.⁸⁹ My objective is not to interrogate those appropriations of the term, but to suggest that the portrait of Jesus as guru Thangaraj has sketched resonates with *Karunamayudu*'s portrayal of Jesus.

From Thangaraj's perspective, the concept of guru common to Siddhanta can be used to express the 'uniqueness and finality of Christ' in a way that the other attempts have not.⁹⁰ It is a project he deems especially relevant in South India where Saiva Siddhanta has for centuries been a dominant religious tradition.⁹¹ Given that *Karunamayudu* was made in South India by South Indians keen to 'Indianize' Jesus for South Indian viewers, it therefore seems worthwhile to consider whether the Jesus of *Karunamayudu* reflects that tradition. Xavier Irudayaraj's discussion of

⁸⁶ Thangaraj, 86. For more recent discussions of the concept, see Jan Peter Schouten, *Jesus as Guru: The Image of Christ among Hindus and Christians in India* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008).

⁸⁷ Thangaraj, 87, 88.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 80.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 60-64.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 32. Saiva Siddhanta is one of the older and more enduring religious traditions in South India. Unless otherwise noted, the claims made about Saiva Siddhanta in the following discussion should be read as a précis of Thangaraj's views, not mine.

⁹¹ Saiva Siddhanta generally represents the tradition that worships Sivam as God.

Jesus as 'the crucified guru' preceded Thangaraj's by over twenty years.⁹²

Nevertheless, I have chosen to follow Thangaraj's argument because it is, ostensibly, more developed than Irudayaraj's and because it is adequate for presenting a heuristic thesis about *Karunamayudu's* contribution to theological reflection.⁹³

According to Thangaraj 'there is no monolithic understanding of guru in Indian religious history and thought'.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, a guru in India has generally been understood to be a human being (male or female), who is somehow related to God, and without whom one cannot attain salvation.⁹⁵ In the Siddhanta tradition, the concept of guru is characterized by three additional qualifications. The guru is seen 'in opposition to that of *avatar*', or form of divine descent.⁹⁶ The guru is understood to embody both the 'justice and mercy of God', not just God's compassion.⁹⁷ Third, one's choice of guru need not derive from a particular line of hierarchical succession.⁹⁸ According to Thangaraj, the meaning of guru from a Siddhanta perspective involves both a spiritual presence in the heart of the believer, and the appearance of God (*Sivam*) in the form of a human being who has achieved such a 'stage of maturation' that he or she can function as God to believers.⁹⁹ Thangaraj also stresses that in Saiva Siddhanta the concept of guru is inextricable from that of a *sisya* (disciple) without whom a guru cannot be a guru.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, after a person is recognized as a guru he or she '*functions* as God' to his or her disciples.¹⁰¹ To be more precise, 'the guru's presence makes God's presence real to the disciples' through what he does, not by virtue of his nature.¹⁰²

⁹² See Xavier Irudayaraj, *Guru in Saiva Siddhanta: A Dialogue Approach* (s.n., 1973).

⁹³ Thangaraj, 80-82.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 57. For a detailed discussion of divine descents in Hinduism, see Francis Xavier Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁹⁷ Thangaraj, 57.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁰⁰ Thangaraj, 91.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 94, 95.

To think of Jesus as guru along these lines means that Jesus' divinity is not necessarily inherent but is realized in the attribution of his disciples and affirmed by his activity in the world.¹⁰³ One of Jesus' primary activities was teaching, but it was the method and content of his teaching that established his recognition as a *guru*. He taught with an authority that came from 'his unique relationship to God', his 'identification with those he taught' and his loving, non-manipulative invitation to follow in his footsteps.¹⁰⁴ It was not an authority attributed to him by virtue of caste or human religious authority. Furthermore, his teaching was not designed primarily to increase knowledge in his hearers, but to enable them to follow his example; by implication, to perhaps function as gurus for others one day.¹⁰⁵ From such a perspective, Jesus' death on the cross can be understood not so much as an act of atonement, but the 'supreme enactment' of his teaching, for in that event he was most 'fully himself'.¹⁰⁶

In my view, the portrayal of Jesus in *Karunamayudu* has strong parallels with Thangaraj's description of a Saivite guru. The *guru-sisya* relationship between Jesus and his disciples is established early in the film when John and Andrew seek out Jesus and ask to follow him. Jesus' disciples also refer to him repeatedly throughout the film as 'Lord'. Although he does perform miracles, his quiet authority is established primarily through his compassionate responses to people of various backgrounds, including lepers, prostitutes, and zealots. When Judas Iscariot and Barabbas first discuss Jesus, Judas states that in contrast to their own efforts to build a kingdom by force, Jesus is building a kingdom based on love. Likewise, the kingdom of God as Jesus proclaimed it in the movie was not only about God's role as the final authority and arbiter of righteousness in creation; it was also a 'vision of human community' in which 'humans, who are under the judgment and mercy of God, are called upon to love and care for one another, as children of the same God'.¹⁰⁷ He welcomed Judas into his band on that very premise. Thus, Jesus' appeal

¹⁰³ Thangaraj admits that such a view is not entirely consistent with creedal Christianity in that the significance of Jesus' relationship to God is not 'tied to substantialist language that uses terms such as "nature" and "substance"'. Thangaraj, 121.

¹⁰⁴ Thangaraj, 96.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 95-96. The perceived implication is my own, not drawn directly from Thangaraj.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 100, 101.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 98.

as a teacher derived as much from his method of communication as the content of his teaching.

Perhaps one of the most significant parallels to be drawn between *Karunamayudu*'s portrayal of Jesus and Thangaraj's summary of a Saivite guru has to do with the notion that a guru not only teaches, but 'effects changes in his disciples by his touch and by his look'.¹⁰⁸ In chapter 5 I noted that at least four characters in *Karunamayudu* are profoundly changed by the power of Jesus' gaze, as communicated through shot-reverse-shots and sustained close-ups of Jesus' eyes. Furthermore, I discussed how such conventions have been used in Indian cinema to facilitate *darshan* with gods and goddesses on the silver screen. Consequently, it is arguable that some viewers may have perceived *Karunamayudu* as a site for experiencing *darshan* with Jesus. Furthermore, the Jesus of *Karunamayudu* is gentle of touch, whether embracing his mother or healing a leper.

Had Jesus remained in the grave, Thangaraj argues, he would have remained another guru from the past. Instead, the events of Jesus' resurrection, ascension, and of Pentecost reconfigured the image of Jesus as a Saivite guru in several ways. For Jesus' original disciples, the events of Jesus' victory over death reinforced their perception of his role as God for them; a 'divine vindication of what Jesus stood for'.¹⁰⁹ He was no longer physically present to his disciples but available to them through the Holy Spirit.¹¹⁰ Such a perception is in stark contrast to a Saiva Siddhanta understanding of guru as local and individualized.¹¹¹ Jesus' physical absence post-ascension also made him accessible as guru for all people and all ages, although his ability to function as such remains dependent on the imaginative vision or perception of his disciples.¹¹² Furthermore, Jesus is no longer recognized primarily as a 'teacher-guru' but the 'victim-guru, the dying guru, the crucified guru'.¹¹³ Additionally, Thangaraj argues, in light of Jesus' physical absence, the function of baptism and the eucharist were changed from a kind of initiatory rite to a means of mutual

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 98.

¹⁰⁹ Thangaraj, 103.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 101.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 105.

¹¹² In my view, Thangaraj's account would be strengthened by acknowledging the role of the Holy Spirit in the development of this imaginative vision.

¹¹³ Ibid., 101.

edification. Finally, Jesus' victory over death reconfigured the concept of discipleship. Whereas a disciple may be tempted to adopt a passive relationship to a guru who is physically present, Jesus' absence has required that his disciples maintain his presence by continually re-enacting his teachings.¹¹⁴ Thangaraj's revision of Jesus as a Saivite guru is reflected in *Karunamayudu's* portrayal of Jesus, perhaps most profoundly in the ascension scene where he instructs his disciples to imitate his life and teachings, before growing ever larger to fill the universe.

Thangaraj admits that recognizing Jesus as a Saivite guru does not sit squarely with the incarnational emphasis of creedal Christologies or with a Siddhanta vision of guru. Nevertheless, he argues that since Christological discourse involves the articulation of Jesus' significance using 'relevant and meaningful images, concepts, or metaphors from the local context', it is appropriate to employ the Saivite image of guru to discuss Jesus in South India.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, 'guru-Christology . . . opens up the idea of the Christ-event as the whole web of guru-sisya relations, and thus enables the continued use of incarnational language within a broader understanding of the symbol "Christ".¹¹⁶ As a result, the incarnation of Jesus need not turn primarily on the "stuff" that Jesus is made of, but the new community 'initiated by the incarnation of God in Christ'.¹¹⁷

As Thangaraj himself has acknowledged, his thesis is not the final word on Jesus as guru.¹¹⁸ Furthermore, he has acknowledged that some aspects of Saiva Siddhanta present critical problems for Christological reflection. He argues that the concept of 'soul' in Siddhanta tends to reduce salvation to a 'spiritual affair' and its inherent heirarchicalism is an implicit endorsement of caste.¹²⁰ It is important to recognize, therefore, that while *Karunamayudu's* portrayal of Jesus as guru may on the one hand provide an example of Indian Christology at work, it can also be problematic for Christian theology and the cause of Christian evangelism, to the

¹¹⁴ For a fuller development of these variations on Jesus, see *Ibid.*, 101-103.

¹¹⁵ Thangaraj, 131.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, chapter 5.

¹²⁰ Thangaraj, 115.

degree that it is understood to endorse a way of life contrary to the portrait of Jesus that Thangaraj has proposed.

Like Thangaraj's project, my thesis in this section is deliberately heuristic and limited in scope. Nevertheless, by defining Christology as an 'imaging or image-building activity' Thangaraj legitimates my thesis that by visualizing the concept of Jesus as guru, *Karunamayudu* may be seen as a contribution to Christological discourse in India.¹²¹ Clive Marsh has argued that films of Jesus are 'examples of the way in which images of Jesus are carried and explored within culture'.¹²² Likewise, William Telford has suggested that Jesus films are a 'significant medium' through which people in the last century have formed their impressions of him.¹²³ By presenting an image of Jesus as guru that resonates particularly with the Saivite tradition *Karunamayudu* provides viewers with the opportunity to consider whether God was present in Jesus, and whether they will opt to participate in a community of people who worship him as God and re-enact his teachings and acts of compassion in the world. In light of Thangaraj's thesis, the history of the film also raises intriguing questions for further research about how the film has functioned for its Christian exhibitors. My cursory review of their accounts of the film in chapter 6 suggests, it may function, if not as a guru, at least as a site of edification, worship, and instruction in the ways of their guru, Jesus.

7. Contingencies

Post-colonial critic Edward Said once argued that it is difficult to 'draw a clear circle around British London'.¹²⁴ The same could be said about the task of tracing out the theoretical contours of this discussion. Scholars with an interest in film's relationship

¹²¹ Ibid. 140-151. Perhaps this study will encourage the inclusion of films in discussions of Indian images of Jesus.

¹²² Clive Marsh, *Christ in Focus: Radical Christocentrism in Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2005), 32; William R. Telford, 'Jesus Christ Movie Star: The Depiction of Jesus in the Cinema', in *Explorations in Theology and Film*, ed. Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 122

¹²³ William R. Telford, 'Jesus Christ Movie Star: The Depiction of Jesus in the Cinema', in *Explorations in Theology and Film*, ed. Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 122

¹²⁴ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993), 15.

to religion and theology have long acknowledged that critical approaches to the question are multiple and inevitably informed by disciplinary or methodological commitments.¹²⁵ An overview of the general discussion reinforces film theorist Noel Carroll's observation that 'Film cannot be reduced to a single essence or function'; instead, the questions we ask about film yield 'a collection of piecemeal theories'.¹²⁶ This account of *Karunamayudu*'s journey from production to reception, however, provides documented evidence of some of those varied approaches and attitudes. It also draws attention to some dynamics that interested scholars would do well to keep in mind as the discussion becomes more global in its orientation.

As the history of *Karunamayudu* and its implications for understanding the significance of Jesus Christ in India suggests, Western Christian theologies may play less of a normative role in the rapidly diversifying discussion of film, religion, and theology.¹²⁷ Western scholars in particular can no longer assume that the relationship between film and the religio-cultural ethos of the West is a paradigm that can be applied to all contexts. Granted, people representing different religious traditions sometimes share similar concerns about the influence of the cinematic medium or individual films. Christians, for example, were not the only ones in India who objected to the release of the *Da Vinci Code* (2006).¹²⁸ Nevertheless, common concerns about film among adherents of various religious communities is more likely an indication of shared theories about film as a medium of communication than a common religious or theological confession.

The contingent relationship between culture, film, religion, and theology in the history of *Karunamayudu* also complicates a tendency in the literature to discuss the relationship in terms of dialogue. The latter strategy tends to gloss over the complex relationship between religion and cultures and, as noted above, is impractical for addressing contexts where Western conceptions of secularization do

¹²⁵ William R. Telford, 'Through a Lens Darkly: Critical Approaches to Theology and Film,' in *Cinema Divinite: Religion, Theology and the Bible in Film*, ed. Eric Christianson, Peter Francis, and William R. Telford (London: SCM, 2005).

¹²⁶ Noel Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), xiv.

¹²⁷ Particularly, I have in mind here Paul Tillich's influence on the discussion. See the review of the Western discussion in chapter 1.

¹²⁸ 'Muslim Parties Ask Christians to Protest "Da Vinci Code",' *Indo-Asian News Service* (2006). http://www.indianmuslims.info/news/2006/may/20/muslim_world_news/muslim_parties_ask_christians_to_protest_da_vinci_code.html (accessed 21 May 2007).

not apply. Theologian and film critic Gerard Loughlin has argued convincingly that the tendency to imagine film in dialogue with theology is for the most part an act of ventriloquism.¹²⁹ In keeping with cultural studies' or anthropological studies' approaches to the relationship between film and religion, therefore, I suggest that the motifs of negotiation, mediation, or remediation more accurately represent the encounter between film and theology, or religion.¹³⁰ With George Aichele and Richard Walsh, I share the conviction that critics need to admit their biases when constructing or addressing that relationship.¹³¹ In an effort to escape the constraints of sectarian strategies, however, praxis oriented models may put at risk a full-orbed account of the nuances and negotiations in a given film's history if they ignore the influences of theological and religious traditions.¹³²

On a side note, if the contingencies highlighted in this study have implications for ongoing scholarship in the field, I suggest that they may also be instructive for those involved in Jesus film evangelism. The vagaries of visual traditions, audience expectations, personal histories, and the logistics involved with creating a film complicate the tendency among proponents of film evangelism to conflate select Jesus films and the biblical text. Practitioners of film evangelism may also find it instructive to consider more carefully how cultural contexts and their own understanding of communication shapes their enterprise and their understanding of the ways in which people respond to such films.

In this section I have identified and discussed some general contingencies that have marked the history of *Karunamayudu*, as well as some of their implications for the discussion of film, religion, and theology. In the course of reviewing these contingencies, however, I concluded that the demands of theorizing, mapping, or otherwise explaining their significance for the discussion of film, religion, and

¹²⁹ Gerard Loughlin, 'Cinéma Divinité: A Theological Introduction', in *Cinéma Divinité: Religion, Theology and the Bible in Film*, ed. Eric Christianson, Peter Francis, and William R. Telford (London: SCM, 2005), 3.

¹³⁰ On film and religion as remediation, see Stephen Hughes and Birgit Meyer, 'Guest Editors' Preface', *Postscripts* 1.2 / 1.3, no. (2005): 152. On a side note, John Lyden's paradigm of film as religion may only be conceivable in contexts where Western perceptions of secularization prevail: Lyden. Especially South Indian film has been so bound up with religious traditions or issues of concern to the region that I find it difficult to imagine how one might distinguish film-going as an alternative tradition in that context.

¹³¹ See George Aichele and Richard Walsh, eds., *Screening Scripture: Intertextual Connections between Scripture and Film* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), xi-xii.

¹³² Lindvall, 'Hollywood Chronicles'.

theology, exceed the capacity of most current approaches. Textual analyses, cultural analyses, and psychotherapeutic analyses—to name a few—all have individual contributions to make to the discussion. In my view, however, none of them are capable of accommodating or framing the multiple variables—ranging from theories of secularization to divine revelation—that influence current negotiations of film, religion, and theology. If this study brings to one key observation to the fore, it is the need for a more robust analytical framework with which to classify, if not interrogate, the multiple contingencies in film's relationship to theology and religion on a global scale. In the attempt to appreciate how these coordinates function in the way we engage with films, it is worth considering briefly David Morgan's model of covenants with images that I introduced in chapter 2.¹³³ In my view, it offers a helpful way to identify the various coordinates that can shape film's perceived relationship to film and religion in daily life.

8. Covenants with images / covenants with films

In his book *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice*, David Morgan has argued that our relationship to images, or the way that we see, is informed by a matrix of factors including, but not limited to, theological or religious traditions. Morgan has discussed some of these dynamics as they relate to film in his subsequent work, *The Lure of Images*.¹³⁴ Nevertheless, I will refer here primarily to his earlier text because it is there that he outlines in greater detail the taxonomy of covenants that I have in mind. By proposing the model's potential contributions to the discussion, I do not mean to suggest that Morgan has the final word. Rather I suggest that his model accommodates a greater range of complexities than either John R. May's or Robert K. Johnston's have to date.¹³⁵

¹³³ David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), chapter 3.

¹³⁴ David Morgan, *The Lure of Images* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), chapter 6.

¹³⁵ To review May's and Johnston's models see chapter 1.

Morgan's premise is that seeing 'relies on an apparatus of assumptions and inclinations, habits and routines, historical associations and cultural practices'.¹³⁶ The term 'sacred gaze', therefore, refers to

the manner in which a way of seeing invests an image, a viewer, or an act of viewing with spiritual significance. The study of religious visual culture is therefore the study of images, but also the practices and habits that rely on images as well as the attitudes and preconceptions that inform vision as a cultural act.¹³⁷

Morgan argues that without some kind of agreement between an image and its viewer about the 'particular range of possibilities and codes of interpretation' the image has to offer, the viewer is unable to see what it may reveal.¹³⁸ He calls this agreement a 'covenant' because it sets out 'the terms of the gaze that joins viewer and image in a social relation'.¹³⁹ In other words, what we see has much to do with what we have been conditioned to see. Genres of film, for example, represent a kind of covenant. Viewers have different expectations of horror films than they do of romantic comedies, but those expectations have been nurtured reflexively over time and in the course of myriad negotiations.¹⁴⁰

The significance of Morgan's model, in contrast to strictly literary or cultural studies' approaches, is that it refuses to locate meaning exclusively in the film or with the viewer. Instead, it recognizes that a film's significance is negotiated in relation to a number of variables. Furthermore, it allows for change; such covenants are rarely fixed. A viewer's relationship of trust with an image can vary according to the

¹³⁶ Ibid., 3.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 3. The relationship between Morgan's 'sacred gaze' and the 'Indian gaze' described by Ashish Rajadhyaksha in his account of D.G. Phalke's cinematic innovations at the birth of Indian cinema deserves further interrogation. See chapter 4; Ashish Rajadhyaksha, 'The Phalke Era: Conflict of Traditional Form and Modern Technology', *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 14-15 (1987). Morgan adopts Catherine Albanese's definition of religion as 'a system of symbols (creed, code, cultus) by means of which people (a community) orient themselves in the world with reference to both ordinary and extraordinary powers, meanings, and values'. Catherine Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion*, 3rd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1999), 11; Quoted in Ibid., 53.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 76.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge Press, 2000), 71.

'society and situation in question', as well as the 'genre of imagery' one observes.¹⁴¹ How one understands an image's ability to 'render "truth"', Morgan argues, depends in large part on the 'eye of faith' through which one sees.¹⁴²

According to Morgan the way we see and what we see involves an intricate matrix of two kinds of covenants. The first group of covenants involves a set of criteria that are external to the image. They include communities of interpretation, orthodoxies, authorities or, alternatively, what he calls the 'open contract' in which a viewer comes to an image with no expectations, save that 'a meaningful engagement with the image will be repaid in some manner'.¹⁴³ The second group of criteria involves various kinds of agreements with images themselves. These include mimetic, allegorical, exemplary, expressivist, and deconstructive contracts that turn on our epistemological expectations of what specific images promise to show us.¹⁴⁴ The mimetic contract, for example, 'assures viewers that what they see is a reliable portrayal of a referent because it conforms to what they already know something looks like'.¹⁴⁵ By contrast, the deconstructivist contract 'assures viewers that the image they see self-critically questions the motives of vision, the conventions of image-making, and the relationship of images to any other form of representation'.¹⁴⁶ These two sets of contracts can not only be combined, but are open to change subject to the introduction of new information, changing authorities, or the failure of images to deliver on their part of the agreement.¹⁴⁷

An in-depth discussion of the implications of Morgan's model for the analysis of film, religion, and theology exceeds the parameters of this study. Nevertheless, I introduce it in conclusion because it holds much promise for further interrogation of the variables that have marked *Karunamayudu*'s journey from production to reception. John Gilman's decision to deploy the film for Christian witness in India, for example, was based on an understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and Hinduism that were external to the film. His initial approach to *Karunamayudu*,

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 76, 81.

¹⁴² Ibid., 77.

¹⁴³ Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 106.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 133.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 106.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 111.

therefore was informed by suspicions that the portrayal of Jesus in the movie might not conform to his perception of an orthodox understanding of Jesus. His conclusion that its content conformed adequately to his understanding of an orthodox representation of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection also reflected what Morgan calls an expressivist contract with the film itself. That is, it assured him that what he had seen, and what he expected others would see, was 'the essence or spirit' of the Gospel, 'not its accidental appearances'.¹⁴⁸ As such, he deemed it suitable for consumption as a representation of the Christian Gospel message.

The coordinates of a Hindu viewer's covenant with the film, however, may differ significantly. She may expect it to somehow render Jesus present to her as she would expect a temple statue to render her local goddess present to her. To reiterate, the merit of Morgan's model is that it makes it possible to chart these different coordinates of human encounters with film in a way that May's and Johnston's models do not. Likewise, it can account for the influence of confessional traditions in the evaluation of a film's religious or theological significance without necessarily assigning any single tradition a normative role.

9. Conclusion

In this research project I employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods in order to account for the ways religious or theological traditions have shaped the production, content, distribution, and reception of *Karunamayudu* (1978), an Indian Jesus film. Additionally, I sought to understand how people have interpreted or appropriated the film at various stages in its life to date and how those encounters may have been formed by, or shaped, religious or theological traditions. My implicit hypothesis was that an account of this nature, especially given its non-Western coordinates, may have some modest contributions to make to the rapidly developing discussion of film, religion, and theology. I conclude with some brief and general observations.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 106. In this respect, perhaps, Gilman's understanding of *Karunamayudu* may be more along the lines of a 'Christ-figure' film rather than a Jesus film. See chapter 1 for a review of the distinction.

The task of identifying religions and theological influences turned out to be more complex than anticipated. By focusing on the history of a single movie rather than attempting to interpret it as an independent text or as the product of a given culture at a given time, however, this study brought to light a range of contingencies and perceptual frameworks that complicate our understanding of film's relationship to theology and religion. They include, but are not limited to: religious and theological traditions, theories of communication, cinematic tastes, political identities, cinematic cultures, perceptual frameworks, various strains of hybridity, and, in the case of *Karunamayudu*, Christologies. Those contingencies in turn invite us to consider how nuanced the terms film, religion, and theology are and how negotiable and tangled is their relationship.

This account also reiterates what contributors to the discussion have always maintained; movies can contribute to theological reflection and development. As I have just argued, *Karunamayudu* provides a rare cinematic visualization of Christ as guru. Furthermore, as indicated by comments from its exhibitors, the film has functioned as a site for personal reflection and played a role in shaping their self-perceptions as Christians in India. At the same time, the film's hybridity complicates attempts to establish the orthodoxy of its representation of Jesus. 'Whose orthodoxy?' one might ask. Indeed, like other expressions of Indian Christology, it invites reflection about the nature of orthodoxy itself. In so doing, it serves as a reminder that theologizing is always an 'interreligious, comparative, dialogical, and confessional enterprise'.¹⁴⁹ By providing empirical evidence of such negotiations in the history of *Karunamayudu* (1978) this account contributes to a more comprehensive awareness of the contingencies that shape film's religious and theological significance in daily life in all contexts.

¹⁴⁹ Francis Xavier Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 7.

APPENDIX A

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

OM *Karunamayudu/Daya Sagar* CP Team Questionnaire

By Dwight Friesen, PhD (Cand.) University of Edinburgh; 20 Feb/2006/OM India/Secunderabad, AP.

NOTE: *You are not required to participate in this survey* that has been designed to help me understand audience responses to *Karunamayudu/Daya Sagar* for my PhD research. However, please understand that your responses will be kept confidential. Whatever information you provide may be used for my research purposes and may be included in my dissertation, published articles or public presentations, but no reference to your name will be made without your permission. Please answer briefly from your own experience. *Thank you.*

Name _____ Age _____ Male Female

My home state is _____ I now serve with OM in the state of _____

Status: Leader Team Member Total number of months or years on a CP team _____

Please DO NOT use my name in your research. Please feel free to use my name in your research

1) In your present location, where do you show the film?

Homes	Never	Approximately _____ times each month
Public places in villages	Never	Approximately _____ times each month
Public places in towns	Never	Approximately _____ times each month
Public places in cities	Never	Approximately _____ times each month

2) Please indicate the *average* size of the audiences to which you show the film in your present location:

Homes	0-19	20-50	Other _____
Public places in villages	0-19	20-49	50-100 100-199 Other _____
Public places in towns	0-19	20-49	50-100 100-199 Other _____
Public places in cities	0-19	20-49	50-100 100-199 Other _____

3) Approximately many times have you seen *Karunamayudu (Daya Sagar)*? 0-9 10-49
50-100 100-199 If over 200, give approximate number of times _____

4) From your experience, describe the *most common* audience responses during the film show.

I have a story of an extreme or extraordinary response to the film that I would be prepared to write out for you at a later time.

5) Do audiences in villages respond differently than audiences in cities? YES NO NO
COMMENT (If you answered YES please describe the differences)

6) Do you ever show the film *without explaining the film or preaching*? YES NO
OCCASIONALLY If you answered YES or OCCASIONALLY, explain your reasons in a sentence.

7) If people saw the film *without any explanation or preaching*, what would they understand about Jesus?

8) Does a person's religious background affect their response to the film? YES NO Explain.

9) After watching the film have audience members ever made comments comparing Jesus to other gods? YES NO If YES, please give an example.

10) Do you prefer *Karunamayudu/Daya Sagar* to other Jesus films you have seen? YES NO Why?.

11) How has the film influenced your personal understanding of Jesus?

12) Is there anything about the film that you do not like? YES NO If yes, please list those parts and explain why you don't like them.

Dwight Friesen _____ Date _____
Your signature _____ Date _____

SOURCES CONSULTED

- 'A Film About Christ in India.' *Organisation Catholique Internationale du Cinéma et de l'Audiovisuel*, March / June (1986), 22.
- Abbott, Walter M., S.J., ed. *The Documents of Vatican II*. New York: Guild Press; America Press; Association Press, 1966.
- Aichele, George, and Richard Walsh, eds. *Screening Scripture: Intertextual Connections Between Scripture and Film*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2002.
- Alahari, Sai Prasad. 'From Resistance to Indifference? Seven Decades of Popular Telugu Cinema.' *Deep Focus* Jan - May (2005): 25-34.
- Allen, Susan L. *Media Anthropology: Informing Global Citizens*. Westport, Conn.: Bergin and Garvey, 1994.
- Altheide, David L. *Qualitative Media Analysis. Qualitative Media Analysis Qualitative Research Methods*; V. 38. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1996.
- 'Am Anfang: Gewat in Den Straben Von Kapharnaum.' *FILM -Korrespondenz* 12, no. 18 (1979): 22-23.
- Amaladoss, M. *The Asian Jesus*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2006.
- Ambikananda, Saraswati, and Manisha Wilmette Brown. *The Uddhava Gita*. London: Frances Lincoln, 2000.
- 'Amruthavani: Andhra's Catholic Communications Centre.' *Indian Currents* 6, no.4 (1993) 4.
- Andrews, C. F., ed. *Mahatma Gandhi's Ideas: Including Selections from his Writings*. Read Books, 2007.
- Ang, Ien. *Desperately Seeking the Audience*. London: Routledge, 1991.
- _____. 'On the Politics of Empirical Audience Research.' In *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner, 177-197. Malden, Mass. and Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.
- _____. *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences for a Postmodern World*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Anker, Roy M. *Catching Light: Looking for God in the Movies*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004.

- Antes, Peter. 'What Do We Experience If We Have Religious Experience?' *Numen* 49, no. 3 (2002): 336-342.
- Appadurai, Arjun. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Arnold, Matthew. *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism*. New York: Macmillan, 1883.
- Arora, Sushil. *Cyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*. Vol. 2. New Delhi: Anmol, 2004.
- Asad, Talal. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.
- Askew, Kelly Michelle, and Richard R. Wilk, eds. *The Anthropology of Media: A Reader*. Malden, Mass. and Oxford: Blackwell, 2002.
- Atkinson, Paul, Amanda Coffey, Sara Delamont, John Lofland, and Lyn H. Lofland, eds. *Handbook of Ethnography*. Los Angeles: Sage, 2007.
- Babington, Bruce, and Peter William Evans. *Biblical Epics: Sacred Narrative in the Hollywood Cinema*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993.
- Bakker, Freek L. 'Editorial.' *Exchange* 33, no. 4 (2004): 305-309.
- _____. 'The Image of Jesus Christ in the Jesus Films Used in Missionary Work.' *Exchange* 33, no. 4 (2004): 310-333.
- _____. 'Shanti Sandesham, a New Jesus Film Produced in India: Indian Christology in Pictures.' *Exchange* 36 (2007): 41-64.
- Banaji, Shakuntala. *Reading 'Bollywood': The Young Audience and Hindi Films*. Houndmills, England and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Barker, Martin. 'The Newson Report: A Case Study in 'Common Sense'. In *The Audience Studies Reader*, edited by Will Brooker and Deborah Jermyn, 74-90. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Barker, Martin, and Thomas Austin. *From Antz to Titanic: Reinventing Film Analysis*. London: Pluto, 2000.
- Barker, Martin, and Ernest Mathijs. *Watching the Lord of the Rings: Tolkien's World Audiences*. New York: Peter Lang, 2008.
- Barnouw, Erik, and S. Krishnaswamy. *Indian Film*. 2nd ed. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980.

- Barsotti, Catherine. 'Películas-¿: A Gaze from Reel to Real? Going to the Movies with Latinas in Los Angeles.' In *Reframing Theology and Film*, ed. Robert K. Johnston, 179-204. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007.
- Baskaran, S. Theodore. 'Encountering a New Art.' In *Tamil Cinema: The Cultural Politics of India's Other Film Industry*, edited by Selvaraj Velayutham, 111-123. London and New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Baugh, Lloyd. *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film*. Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1997.
- Bazin, Andre. 'Cinema and Theology: The Case of Heaven over the Marshes.' *Journal of Religion and Film* 6, no. 2 (2002) (accessed 16 December 2008).
- Bergesen, Albert J., and Andrew M. Greeley. *God in the Movies*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2000.
- 'Best Cinematography - National Film Awards'.
http://entertainment.indianetzone.com/films/1/best_cinematography.htm
 (accessed 26 January 2009).
- Bhaskar, Rao, D. 'Attention Viewers! It Is Your Duty to Ban Mythological Films!' *Roopavani* (1948): 11-12.
- Binford, Mira Reym. 'Innovation and Imitation in the Contemporary Indian Cinema.' In *Cinema and Cultural Identity: Reflections on Films from Japan, India and China*, ed. Wimal Dissanayake, 77-92. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1988.
- Bird, Michael. 'Film as Hierophany.' In *Religion in Film*, ed. John R. May and Michael Bird, 3-22. Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee Press, 1982.
- Bird, Michael S., and John R. May, eds. *Religion in Film*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982.
- Black, Gregory D. *The Catholic Crusade against the Movies, 1940-1975*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, and Eberhard Bethge. *Letters and Papers from Prison*. London: SCM, 1953.
- Booth, Gregory D. 'Traditional Content and Narrative Structure in the Hindi Commercial Cinema.' *Asian Folklore Studies* 54, no. 2 (1995): 169-190.
- Bordwell, David. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1989.

- Bordwell, David, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985.
- Bose, Derek. *Brand Bollywood: A New Global Entertainment Order*. New Delhi: Sage, 2006.
- Boyd, Robin H. S. *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*. Madras, India: Christian Literature Society, 1969.
- Brosius, Christiane, and Melissa Butcher. *Image Journeys: Audio-Visual Media and Cultural Change in India*. New Delhi and London: Sage, 1999.
- Brown, Judith M., and Robert Eric Frykenberg, eds. *Christians, Cultural Interactions, and India's Religious Traditions*. Grand Rapids, MI; London: William B. Eerdmans; RoutledgeCurzon, 2002.
- Brown, William J., John D. Keeler, and Terry Lindvall. 'Audience Responses to *The Passion of the Christ*.' *Journal of Media and Religion* 6, no. 2 (2007): 87-107.
- Brukman, Jan. 'Stealing Women among the Koya of South India.' *Anthropological Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (1974): 304-313.
- Burnett, R. G., and E. D. Martell. 'The Devil's Camera (1920).' In *The Religion and Film Reader*, ed. Jolyon Mitchell and S. Brent Plate, 32-34. New York and London: Routledge, 2007.
- Bush Ashton, Martha. 'Yakshagana: A South Indian Folk Theatre.' *The Drama Review* 13, no. 3 (1969): 148-155.
- Campbell, Richard H., and Michael R. Pitts. *The Bible on Film: A Checklist, 1897-1980*. Metuchen, NJ and London: Scarecrow, 1981.
- Carey, James W. *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*. Repr. ed. New York and London: Routledge, 1992.
- Carroll, Noël. *Theorizing the Moving Image* Cambridge Studies in Film. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Case, M. *Seeing Krishna: The Religious World of a Brahman Family in Vrindaban*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Castelli, Elizabeth A. Preface to *Representing Religion in World Cinema: Filmmaking, Mythmaking, Culture Making*, ed. S. Brent Plate. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Chandran, Mangala. 'Afternoon Pictures.' *n.p.*, 62-63. (newspaper clipping held by author)

- Chatterjee, Gayatri. 'Icons and Events: Reinventing Visual Construction in Cinema in India.' In *Bollyworld: Popular Indian Cinema through a Transnational Lens*, ed. Raminder Kaur and Ajay J. Sinha, 90-117. New Delhi: Sage, 2005.
- _____. 'Designing a Course in Religion and Cinema in India.' In *Teaching Religion and Film*, edited by Gregory J. Watkins, 77-115. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Chatterjee, Subhjit. 'The Divided Object of Desire: A Note on Spectatorship in Indian Cinema.' *Journal of the Moving Image*, no. 2 (2001): 106-113.
- Chowdhry, Prem. *Colonial India and the Making of Empire Cinema: Image, Ideology and Identity*. New Delhi: Vistaar, 2001.
- Christians, Clifford G. 'Redemptive Media as the Evangelical's Cultural Task.' In *American Evangelicals and the Mass Media*, edited by Quentin J. Schultze, 331-356. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic Books, 1990.
- Clarke, Sathianathan. 'The Jesus of Nineteenth Century Indian Christian Theology.' *Studies in World Christianity* 5, no. 1 (1999): 32-46.
- Cmiel, Kenneth. 'Review of *Culture as Communication: Essays on Media and Society* by James Carey.' *Theory and Society* 21, no. 2 (1992): 285-290.
- Clooney, Francis Xavier. *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Coelho, Christopher. *First Draft for the Screenplay of Karunamayudu*. 1st Draft ed., 1974.
- _____. 'Story, Dialogues and Screenplay for Karunamayudu Along with Direction Notes (Second Draft).' Secunderabad, 1974.
- _____. 'Story, Dialogues and Screenplay, Along with Direction Notes for Karunamayudu (Final Version).' 1974.
- _____. 'How Hindus Filmed the Life of Christ.' *Action*, (January 1980), 16-19.
- _____. *New Kind of Fool: Meditations on St. Francis*. Secunderabad, India: Amruthavani, 1986.
- _____. *And Now I Can See!* Secunderabad, India: JeevanPrint, 2002.
- Cone, James H. 'Theology's Great Sin: Silence in the Face of White Supremacy.' *Black Theology* 2, no. 2 (2004): 139-152.

- Cooper, John Charles, and Carl Skrade. *Celluloid and Symbols*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970.
- Corley, Kathleen E., and Robert L. Webb. 'Introduction: *The Passion*, the Gospels and the Claims of History.' In *Jesus and Mel Gibson's the Passion of the Christ: The Films, the Gospels and the Claims of History*, ed. Kathleen E. Corley and Robert L. Webb, 1-7. London: Continuum, 2004.
- Corley, Kathleen E., and Robert L. Webb, eds. *Jesus and Mel Gibson's the Passion of the Christ: The Film, the Gospels and the Claims of History*. London: Continuum, 2004.
- Cort, John E. 'Bhakti in the Early Jain Tradition: Understanding Devotional Religion in South Asia.' *History of Religions* 42, no. 1 (2002): 59-86.
- Cosandey, Roland, André Gaudreault, and Tom Gunning. *Une Invention du Diable?: Cinéma des Premiers Temps et Religion*. Sainte-Foy, Quebec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1992.
- Couvares, Francis G. 'Hollywood, Main Street and the Church: Trying to Censor the Movies before the Production Code.' *American Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1992): 584-616.
- Cox, Harvey. *The Secular City*. Revised ed. New York: Macmillan, 1971.
- Creekmur, Corey. 'Popular Hindi Cinema and the Film Song.' In *Traditions in World Cinema*, ed. Linda Badley, R. Barton Palmer, and Steven Jay Schneider, 193-202. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006.
- Crowther, Samuel Adjai. *Experiences with Heathens and Mohammedans*. London: SPCK, 1892.
- Custen, George Frederick. *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992.
- 'D.G. Phalke; Dossier; Swadeshi Moving Pictures.' *Continuum* 2, no. 1 (1988-89): 50-73.
- Damascene, St John the. *On Holy Images, Followed by Three Sermons on the Assumption*. Translated by Mary H. Allies. London: Thomas Baker, 1898.
- Dart, John. 'The Making of Jesus: An Evangelist and an Unhappy Producer.' *Christian Century* 118, no. 18 (2001): 26-31.
- Das Gupta, Chidananda. 'The Painted Face of Politics.' In *Cinema and Cultural Identity*, ed. Wimal Dissanayake, 127-147. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1988.

- _____. *The Painted Face: Studies in India's Popular Cinema*. New Delhi: Roli Books, 1991.
- Dasgupta, Biplab. *The Naxalite Movement*. Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1974.
- David, C.R.W. *Cinema as Medium of Communication in Tamilnadu*. Madras, India: Christian Literature Society, 1983.
- Davis, Richard H. *Lives of Indian Images*. Princeton, NJ and Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1997.
- Deacy, Christopher. *Faith in Film: Religious Themes in Contemporary Cinema*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005.
- Deacy, Christopher, and Gaye Ortiz. *Theology and Film: Challenging the Sacred/Secular Divide*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2008.
- Derné, Steve. *Movies, Masculinity, and Modernity: An Ethnography of Men's Filmgoing in India*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000.
- Detweiler, Craig. *Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the Twenty-First Century*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008.
- Detweiler, Robert. 'Christ and the Christ Figure in American Fiction.' *Christian Scholar* 47 (1964): 111-124.
- _____. 'Christ in American Religious Fiction.' *Journal of Bible and Religion* 32, no. 1 (1964): 8-14.
- Dhar, P. N. *Indira Gandhi, the 'Emergency', and Indian Democracy*. New Delhi and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Dhondy, Farrukh. 'Keeping Faith: Indian Film and Its World.' *Daedalus: Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 114 (1985): 125-140.
- Dickey, Sara. *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- _____. 'The Politics of Adulation: Cinema and the Production of Politicians in South India.' *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no. 2 (1993): 340-372.
- Dikovitskaya, Margarita. *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn*. Boston: MIT Press, 2005.

- Dissanayake, Wimal. 'Cultural Identity and Asian Cinema: An Introduction.' In *Cinema and Cultural Identity: Reflections on Films from Japan, India, and China*, ed. Wimal Dissanayake, 1-12. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1988.
- _____. 'Rethinking Indian Popular Cinema: Towards Newer Frames of Understanding.' In *Rethinking Third Cinema*, ed. Wimal Dissanayake and Anthony R. Guneratne, 202-225. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Dissanayake, Wimal, and Malti Sahai. *Sholay: A Cultural Reading*. New Delhi: Wiley Eastern, 1992.
- Downing, F. Gerald. 'Dissolving the Synoptic Problem through Film?' *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 24, no. 2 (2001): 117-119.
- Drache, Daniel and Froese, Marc D., The Global Cultural Commons after Cancun: Identity, Diversity and Citizenship(2005). CLPE Research Paper No. 2. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=829987>
- Dwyer, Rachel. *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2006.
- Dwyer, Rachel, and Divia Patel. *Cinema India: The Visual Culture of Hindi Film*. London: Reaktion Books, 2002.
- Dyrness, William A. *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture: The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Eck, Diana L. *Darsâan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*. 2nd revised and enlarged ed. Chambersburg, PA: Anima Books, 1985.
- Egan, Joe. *Brave Heart of Jesus: Mel Gibson's Postmodern Way of the Cross*. Blackrock, Ireland: Columba Press, 2004.
- Eichenberger, Ambros. 'Approaches to Film Criticism.' In *New Image in Religious Film*, ed. John R. May, 3-16. Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1997.
- Eilers, Franz-Josef. *Communicating in Community: An Introduction to Social Communication*. Enlarged ed. Manila: Logos, 1994.
- _____. *Church and Social Communication: Basic Documents*. 2nd ed. Manila: Logos, 1997.
- Eshleman, Paul. *I Just Saw Jesus*. Arrowhead Springs, Calif.: The Jesus Project, 1985.

- Exum, J. Cheryl. *The Bible in Film: The Bible and Film*. Leiden, The Netherlands; Boston: Brill, 2006.
- Ferré, John P. 'The Media of Popular Piety.' In *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture*, ed. Jolyon Mitchell and Sophia Marriage, 83-92. London: T and T Clark, 2003.
- Flesher, Paul Virgil McCracken, and Robert Torrey. *Film and Religion: An Introduction*. Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2007.
- Forrester, Duncan. 'Factions and Filmstars: Tamil Nadu Politics since 1971.' *Asian Survey* 16, no. 3 (1976): 283-296.
- Forshey, Gerald E. *American Religious and Biblical Spectaculars*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1992.
- Fraser, Peter. *Images of the Passion: The Sacramental Mode in Film*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998.
- Friedberg, Anne. 'Spectatorial Flânerie.' In *Exhibition, the Film Reader*, ed. Ina Rae Hark, 173-181. New York and London: Routledge, 2002.
- Friesen, Dwight. 'Showing Compassion and Suggesting Peace in *Karunamayudu* an Indian Jesus Film.' *Studies in World Christianity* 14, no. 2 (2007): 125-141.
- _____. 'Karunamayudu: Seeing Christ Anew in Indian Cinema.' In *Images of the Word: Hollywood's Bible and Beyond*, ed. David Shepherd, 165-188. Atlanta: SBL, 2008.
- Frye, Herman Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957.
- Ganti, Tejaswini. *Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema*. New York and London: Routledge, 2004.
- Gaustad, Edwin S., Darlene Miller, and Allison Stokes. 'Religion in America.' *American Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (1979): 250-283.
- Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books, 1973. Reprint, 2000.
- Gilman, John. *They're Killing an Innocent Man*. Abridged ed. USA: Dayspring International, 2001.
- Gilman, John. 'Sharing Christ's Hope: One Heart at a Time.' *Global Villager*, Fall (2004), 2-3.

- _____. 'Dayasagar and the Life of Christ in India.' *Lausanne World Pulse*, no. September (2006). <http://www.lausanneworldpulse.com/index.php/09-2006> (accessed 01 January 2009).
- Ginsburg, Faye D., Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin. *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.
- Goa, David. 'The Passion, Classical Art and Re-Presentation.' In *Jesus and Mel Gibson's the Passion of the Christ: The Film, the Gospels and the Claims of History*, edited by Kathleen E. Corley and Robert L. Webb, 151-159. London: Continuum, 2004.
- Goel, Sita Ram. *Jesus Christ: An Artifice for Aggression*. New Delhi: Voice of India, 1994.
- Gokulsing, K. Moti, and Wimal Dissanayake. *Indian Popular Cinema: A Narrative of Cultural Change*. Revised and updated ed. Stoke on Trent, UK: Trentham Books, 2004.
- Goodacre, Mark S. 'The Synoptic Jesus and the Celluloid Christ: Solving the Synoptic Problem through Film.' *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, no. 80 (2000): 31-43.
- Goodsmith, Martin. 'Jesus Christ: Movie Star.' 60 min. UK, 1992.
- Gopalan, Lalitha, and British Film Institute. *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema*. London: British Film Institute, 2002.
- Greeley, Andrew. 'Theology and Sociology: On Validating David Tracy.' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59, no. 4 (1991): 643-652.
- Guptara, Prabhu. 'Religion Has Shaped Indian Film.' *Action* (January 1980), 19-22.
- Haines Lyon, Charlotte. 'Kill Bill Volume 2: A Film Worthy of Meaning Making?' *Particip@tions* 5, no. 1 (2008). http://www.participations.org/Volume%205/Issue%201%20-%20special/5_01_haineslyon.htm [accessed 25 Feb 2009].
- Hall, Stuart. 'Encoding/Decoding.' In *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner, 166-176. Malden, Mass. and Oxford: Blackwell, 1980.
- Harbord, Janet. *Film Cultures*. London: Sage, 2002.
- Hardgrave, Robert L. *The Dravidian Movement*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1965.
- _____. 'Politics and the Film in Tamilnadu: The Stars and the DMK.' *Asian Survey* 13, no. 3 (1973): 288-305.
- _____. *Essays in the Political Sociology of South India*. New Delhi: Usha, 1979.

- Hari, G. Sri. 'Centre Won't Give Them Colour.' *Filmfare* 1, no. 14 (1977), 32.
- Hark, Ina Rae, ed. *Exhibition, the Film Reader*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Harpe, Bill. 'Surya Kumari.' *Guardian* 2007, no. 23 June (2005).
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/india/story/0,12559,1486436,00.html>
 [accessed 18 May, 2005].
- Harvey, Peter. *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Hasenberg, Peter. 'The 'Religious' in Film: From *King of Kings* to the *Fisher King*.' In *New Image of Religious Film*, ed. John R. May, 41-56. Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1997.
- Hedlund, Roger E., ed. *Christianity Is Indian: The Emergence of an Indigenous Community*. Delhi: ISPCK, 2004.
- Hendershot, Heather. *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004.
- Hexham, Irving, and Karla O. Poewe. *Understanding Cults and New Age Religions*. Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1998.
- Hill, John, and Pamela Church Gibson. *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- 'Hindu's Jesus Film -- A Hit in India.' *Action*, (January 1980), 1, 8.
- Hoff-Kraemer, Christine. 'From Theological to Cinematic Criticism: Extricating the Study of Religion and Film from Theology.' *Religious Studies Review* 30, no. 4 (2004): 243-249.
- Holloway, Ronald. *Beyond the Image: Approaches to the Religion Dimension in the Cinema*. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1977.
- Hoover, Stewart M. *Religion in the Media Age*. New York and London: Routledge, 2006.
- Hughes, Stephen, and Birgit Meyer. 'Guest Editors' Preface.' *Postscripts* 1.2/1.3 (2005): 149-153.
- Hughes, Stephen P. 'Policing Silent Film Exhibition in Colonial South India.' In *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*, ed. Ravi S. Vasudevan, 39-64. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002.

_____. 'Mythologicals and Modernity: Contesting Silent Cinema in South India.' *Postscripts* 1.2/1.3 (2005): 207-235.

Humphries-Brooks, Stephenson. *Cinematic Savior: Hollywood's Making of the American Christ*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 2006.

Hurley, Neil P. *Theology through Film*. New York and London: Harper and Row, 1970.

_____. *The Reel Revolution: A Film Primer on Liberation*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1978.

_____. 'Christ-Transfigurations in Film: Notes on a Meta-Genre.' *Journal of Popular Culture* 13, no. 3 (1980): 427-433.

_____. 'Cinematic Transfigurations of Jesus.' In *Religion in Film*, ed. Michael Bird and John R. May, 61-78. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982.

Ilaiah, Kancha. *Why I Am Not a Hindu*. Calcutta: Samya, 1996.

'India.' *The Tablet*, 9 February 1980, 142.

'India' <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/in.html#> (accessed 27 Feb 2009)

International, Saheed, ed. *The Qu'ran: English Meanings*. London: Abul-Qasim, 2004.

James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. London; New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1902.

Jasper, David, and S. Brent Plate, eds. *Imag(in)ing Otherness: Filmic Visions of Living Together*. Atlanta: Scholars, 1999.

Jefford, Clayton N. 'Adele Reinhartz, *Scripture on the Silver Screen*.' *Homiletic* 29, no. 1 (2004): 49-51.

Jewett, Robert. *Saint Paul Returns to the Movies*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999.

Jeyaraj, Dasan. 'Followers of Christ Outside the Church in Chennai, India: A Socio-historical study of a non-Church movement'. Unpublished PhD dissertation. The Faculty of Theology, Utrecht University, The Netherlands, 2009.

Johnston, Robert K. *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000.

- Jump, Herbert A. 'The Religious Possibilities of the Motion Picture.' In *The Religion and Film Reader*, ed. Jolyon Mitchell and S. Brent Plate, 14-24. New York and London: Routledge, 2007.
- Katz, Ephraim. *The Macmillan International Film Encyclopedia*. New ed. London: Macmillan, 1994.
- Kaur, Raminder, and Ajay J. Sinha. 'Bollyworld: An Introduction.' In *Bollyworld: Popular Indian Cinema through a Transnational Lens*, edited by Raminder Kaur and Ajay J. Sinha, 9-32. New Delhi; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE Publications, 2005.
- Kazmi, Fareeduddin. 'How Angry Is the Angry Young Man? "Rebellion" in the Conventional Hindi Films.' In *The Secret Politics of Our Desires*, ed. Ashis Nandy, 135-155. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Keil, Charles. 'From the Manger to the Cross: The New Testament Narrative and the Question of Stylistic Retardation.' In *Une Invention du Diable? Cinema des Premiers Temps et Religion*, ed. Roland Cosandey, Andre Gaudreault, and Tom Gunning, 112-120. Sainte-Foy, Quebec: Les Presses de L'Universite Laval, 1992.
- Kuster, Volker. *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ: Intercultural Christology*. London: SCM, 2001.
- Khakar, Sudhir. 'The Cinema as Collective Fantasy.' In *Indian Cinema Superbazaar*, ed. Aruna Vasudev and P. Lenglet, 89-97. New Delhi: Vikas, 1983.
- Kinnard, Roy, and Tim Davis. *Divine Images*. New York: Citadel Press, 1992.
- Knott, Kim. 'Insider/Outsider Perspectives.' In *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. John R. Hinnells, 243-258. London: Routledge, 2005.
- Kohli, Atul. 'The NTR Phenomenon in Andhra Pradesh: Political Change in a South Indian State.' *Asian Survey* 28, no. 10 (1988): 991-1017.
- Kopytoff, Igor. 'The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process.' In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai, 329. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Koslovic, Anton Karl. 'Superman as Christ-Figure: The American Pop Culture Movie Messiah.' *Journal of Religion and Film* 6, no. 1 (2002).
<http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/superman.htm> (accessed 24 September, 2007).
- _____, 'The Structural Characteristics of the Cinematic Christ-Figure', *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*. <http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art8-cinematicchrist.html> (accessed 15 May 2005).

- Kreitzer, Larry J. *The New Testament in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow*. The Biblical Seminar Series, vol 17. Sheffield: JSOT, 1993.
- Krishnamurthy, K. *Mythical Animals in Indian Art*. New Delhi: Abhinav, 1984.
- Larkin, Brian. 'Bandiri Music, Globalisation and Urban Experience in Nigeria.' In *Bollyworld: Popular Indian Cinema through a Transnational Lens*, ed. Raminder Kaur and Ajay J. Sinha, 284-308. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005.
- 'Life of Christ Film Runs Five Shows a Day for 200 Days Straight!' In *The Global Villager*, 12. Virginia Beach, VA: Dayspring International, 2004.
- Lindvall, Terry. *The Silents of God: Selected Issues and Documents in Silent American Film and Religion 1908-1925*. Lanham, Md.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2001.
- _____. 'Religion and Film, Part 1: History and Criticism.' *Communication Research Trends* 23, no. 4 (2004): 1-44.
- _____. 'Religion and Film, Part 2: Theology and Pedagogy.' *Communication Research Trends* 24, no. 1 (2005): 1-40.
- _____. 'Hollywood Chronicles: Toward an Intersection of Film History and Church History.' In *Reframing Theology and Film*, ed. Robert K. Johnston, 126-142. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007.
- _____. *Sanctuary Cinema: Origins of the Christian Film Industry*. New York: New York University Press, 2007.
- Llewellyn, J. E. *Defining Hinduism: A Reader*. London: Equinox, 2005.
- Long, Justin. 'Media Evangelism among the Unreached.' *Lausanne World Pulse* (February 2006), 33-34.
- Long, Justin. 'Media Evangelism among the Unreached.' *Lausanne World Pulse* (February 2006).
- Loughlin, Gerard. 'Cinéma Divinité: A Theological Introduction.' In *Cinéma Divinité: Religion, Theology and the Bible in Film*, ed. Eric Christianson, Peter Francis, and William R. Telford, 1-12. London: SCM, 2005.
- Lutgendorf, Philip. 'All in the (Raghu) Family: A Video Epic in Cultural Context.' In *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia*, ed. Lawrence A. Babb and Susan Snow Wadley, 217-253. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995.

Lutgendorf, Philip. 'A Superhit Goddess: *Jai Santoshi Maa* and Caste Hierarchy in Indian Films' *Manushi* July-Aug, no. 131 (2002): 10-16, 24-37.

_____. 'Jai Santoshi Maa Revisited: On Seeing a Hindu 'Mythological' Film.' In *Representing Religion in World Cinema: Filmmaking, Mythmaking, Culture Making*, ed. S. Brent Plate, 19-42. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Lutgendorf, Philip. 'Is There an Indian Way of Filmmaking?' *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 10, no. 3 (2006): 227-256.

Lyden, John. *Film as Religion*. New York: New York University Press, 2003.

Lynch, Gordon. *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*. Malden, Mass. and Oxford: Blackwell, 2005.

Lynch, William F. *The Image Industries*. London: Sheed and Ward, 1960.

Machin, David. *Ethnographic Research for Media Studies*. London: Arnold, 2002.

Macquarrie, John. *God-Talk: An Examination of the Language and Logic of Theology*. London: SCM, 1967.

Malhotra, B.M. 'Dadasheb Phalke: The Father of Indian Cinema.' *India Perspectives* 17, 3 (2004): 20-24.

Malone, Peter. *Movie Christs and Anti-Christs*. Sydney: Parish Ministry Publications, 1988.

_____. 'Jesus on Our Screens.' In *New Image of Religious Film*, ed. John R. May, 57-71. London: Sheed and Ward, 1997.

Mansfield, Cathy Lee. 'Cognitive and Attitudinal Changes Following the Viewing of the Jesus Film among the Gwembe Tonga of Zambia.' M.A. thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1984.

Marsh, Clive. 'On Dealing with What Films Actually Do to People.' In *Reframing Theology and Film*, edited by Robert K. Johnston, 145-161. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007.

_____. *Christ in Focus: Radical Christocentrism in Christian Theology*. London: SCM Press, 2005.

_____. 'Black Christs in White Christian Perspective: Some Critical Reflections.' *Black Theology* 2, no. 1 (2004): 45-72.

_____. *Cinema and Sentiment: Film's Challenge to Theology*. Milton Keynes, U.K.: Paternoster, 2004.

- Marsh, Clive, and Gaye Ortiz, eds. *Explorations in Theology and Film*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997.
- Martin, Joel W., and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr., eds. *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film*. Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1995.
- Martin, Thomas M. *Images and the Imageless: A Study in Religious Consciousness and Film*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1981.
- Massey, James. *Roots of Dalit History, Christianity, Theology and Spirituality*. 3rd ed. Delhi: ISPCK, 1996.
- May, John R. 'Visual Story and the Religious Interpretation of Film.' In *Religion in Film*, ed. Michael Bird and John R. May, 23-43. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982.
- _____. 'Contemporary Theories Regarding the Interpretation of Religious Film.' In *New Image in Religious Film*, ed. John R. May, 17-37. Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1997.
- _____, ed. *New Image of Religious Film*. Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1997.
- McDannell, Colleen. *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America*. London: Yale University Press, 1995.
- Medved, Michael. *Hollywood Versus America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values*. London: HarperCollins, 1992.
- Mehmood, Hameedudin, and K.M. Sumutkar. *Screen* (1985): 52-53.
- Meyer, Birgit. *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity Among the Ewe in Ghana*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1999.
- Miles, Margaret. *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies*. Boston: Beacon, 1996.
- Miller, David, and Glasgow Media Group. *The Circuit of Mass Communication: Media Strategies, Representation and Audience Reception in the AIDS Crisis*. London: Sage, 1998.
- Mishra, Vijay. *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire*. New York and London: Routledge, 2002.
- Mitchell, Jolyon. 'Emerging Conversations in the Study of Media, Religion and Culture.' In *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture*, ed. Sophia Marriage and Jolyon Mitchell, 337-350. London: Continuum, 2003.

- _____. 'Theology and Film.' In *The Modern Theologians*, ed. David F. Ford, 736-759. London: Blackwell, 2005.
- Mitchell, Jolyon P., and S. Brent Plate, eds. *The Religion and Film Reader*. New York; London: Routledge, 2007.
- Mitchell, Jolyon P. *Media Violence and Christian Ethics*. New Studies in Christian Ethics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. 'Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture.' In *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff, 86-101. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Moon, J. Isaac. 'Image of Christ and Christians in Tamil Cinema.' B.D. Thesis, United Theological College, 1976.
- Morcom, Anna. 'An Understanding between Bollywood and Hollywood? The Meaning of Hollywood-Style Music in Hindi Films.' *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 10, no. 1 (2001): 63-84.
- Morgan, David. 'Protestant Visual Piety and the Aesthetics of American Mass Culture.' In *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture*, ed. Jolyon Mitchell and Sophia Marriage, 107-120. London: T and T, 2003.
- _____. *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.
- Morley, Dave, and British Film Institute. *The Nationwide Audience: Structure and Decoding*. Bfi Television Monograph. London: British Film Institute, 1980.
- Morley, Dave and Charlotte Brunsdon. *The Nationwide Television Studies*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- 'Muslim Parties Ask Christians to Protest "Da Vinci Code".' *Indo-Asian News Service* (2006). http://www.indianmuslims.info/news/2006/may/20/muslim_world_news/muslim_parties_ask_christians_to_protest_da_vinci_code.html (accessed 21 May 2007).
- Nair, P.K., 'In the Age of Silence: Beginnings of Cinema in India.' <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/classics/rr0499/PUdrr6.htm> (accessed 12 October 2006).
- Nandy, Ashis. 'The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance.' *Alternatives* 13, no. 2 (1988): 177-194.
- _____. 'Notes Towards an Agenda for the Next Generation of Film Theorists in India.' *South Asian Popular Culture* 1, no. 1 (2003): 79-84.

- Nayar, Sheila J. 'Invisible Representation.' *Film Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (204): 13-23.
- Neale, Steve. *Genre and Hollywood*. London: Routledge Press, 2000.
- Neill, Stephen. *Colonialism in Christian Missions*. London: Lutterworth, 1966.
- _____. *A History of Christian Missions*. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1980.
- Newton, Joshua. 'Blockbuster Evangelism.' *Christianity Today*, 01 December (2003).
<http://www.ctlibrary.com/10502> (accessed 20 April 2005).
- Niebuhr, H. Richard. *Christ and Culture*. London: Faber and Faber, 1952.
- Noel, Daniel C. 'Nathan Scott and the Nostalgic Fallacy: A Close Reading of Theological Criticism.' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 38, no. 4 (1970): 347-366.
- Nolan, Steve. 'The Books of the Films: Trends in Religious Film-Analysis.' *Literature and Theology* 12 no.1 (March 1998): 1-15.
- _____. 'Towards a New Religious Film Criticism: Using Film to Understand Religious Identity Rather Than Locate Cinematic Analogue.' In *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture*, ed. Jolyon Mitchell and Sophia Marriage, 169-178. London: T and T Clark, 2003.
- O'Donovan, Oliver. *Common Objects of Love: Moral Reflection and the Shaping of Community: The 2001 Stob Lectures*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002.
- Oddie, Geoffrey A. *Imagining Hinduism*. New Delhi: Sage, 2006.
- Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. 2nd ed. New York and London: Routledge, 2002.
- Ortiz, Gaye. 'The Catholic Church and Its Attitude to Film.' In *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture*, ed. Jolyon Mitchell and Sophia Marriage, 179-188. London: T and T Clark, 2003.
- _____. 'World Cinema: Opportunities for Dialogue with Religion and Theology.' In *Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline*, ed. Robert K. Johnston, 73-87. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007.
- Ostwalt Jr., Conrad E. 'Teaching Religion and Film: A Fourth Approach.' In *Teaching Religion and Film*, edited by Greg Watkins, 35-56. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Paffenroth, Kim, 'Film Depictions of Judas' <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/judas.htm> (accessed 2 Feb 2005).

- Palmer, Greta. 'Greatest Movie Success.' *Christian Herald* (1944): 23.
- Pandian, M.S.S. 'Parasakthi: *Life and Times of a DMK Film*.' In *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*, ed. Ravi S. Vasudevan, 65-96. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Panikkar, Raimundo. *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism: Towards an Ecumenical Christophany*. Rev. and enl. ed. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981.
- Park, Richard L. 'Political Crisis in India, 1975.' *Asian Survey* 15, no. 11 (1975): 996-1013.
- Paswan, Sanjay, and Pramanshi Jaideva. 'Dalit Theology.' In *Encyclopaedia of Dalits in India*, edited by Sanjay Paswan and Pramanshi Jaideva, 69-84. Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2002.
- Pendakur, Manjunath. *Indian Popular Cinema: Industry, Ideology and Consciousness*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2003.
- Peperkamp, Esther. 'Being a Christian in the Catholic Way: Protestant and Catholic Versions of the *Jesus* Films and the Evangelization of Poland.' *Postscripts* 1.2/1.3 (2005): 352-374.
- Peters, John Durham. *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Peterson, Mark Allen. *Anthropology and Mass Communication: Media and Myth in the New Millennium*. New York: Berghahn, 2003.
- Pink, Sarah. *Doing Visual Ethnography: Images, Media and Representation in Research*. London: Sage, 2001.
- Pinney, Christopher. *'Photos of the Gods': The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India*. London: Reaktion, 2004.
- Jacob, Plamthodathil S. 'The Indigenous Christian Spirituality of Narayan Vaman Tilak.' In *Christianity Is Indian*, edited by Roger E. Hedlund, 23-58. Delhi: SPCK, 2004.
- Plate, S. Brent. *Religion, Art, and Visual Culture: A Cross-Cultural Reader*. New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002.
- _____. *Re-Viewing the Passion: Mel Gibson's Film and Its Critics*. New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- _____. 'Religious Cinematics: The Immediate Body in the Media of Film.' *Postscripts* 1.2/1.3 (2005): 259-275.

- _____. 'Timothy K. Beal and Tod Linafelt, Eds., *Mel Gibson's Bible: Religion Popular Culture, and the Passion of the Christ*; Kathleen Corley and Robert Webb, Eds., *Jesus and Mel Gibson's the Passion of the Christ*; Philip A. Cunningham, Ed., *Pondering the Passion: What's at Stake for Christians and Jews?*; Paula Fredricksen, *on the Passion of the Christ: Exploring the Issues Raised by the Controversial Movie*; Zev Garber, Ed., *Mel Gibson's Passion: The Film, the Controversy, and Its Implications*; Jorge Gracia, *Mel Gibson's Passion and Philosophy*; Shawn J. Landres and Michael Berenbaum, Eds., *after the Passion Is Gone: American Religious Consequences*.' *Christianity and Literature* 56, no. 3 (2007): 533-537.
- _____, ed. *Representing Religion in World Cinema: Filmmaking, Mythmaking, Culture Making*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Plate, S. Brent. 'Religious Cinematics: The Immediate Body in the Media of Film.' *Postscripts* 1.2 / 1.3 (2005): 259-275.
- Polan, Dana B. *Scenes of Instruction: The Beginnings of the U.S. Study of Film*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.
- Powdermaker, Hortense. *Hollywood, the Dream Factory: An Anthropologist Looks at the Movie-Makers*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1951.
- Prabhupada, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami. *Bhagavad-Gita as It Is*. Trans. A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. Complete Revised and Enlarged ed. Los Angeles: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1990.
- Prasad, M. Madhava. *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- _____. 'This Thing Called Bollywood.' www.india-seminar.com/2003/525/525%20madhava%20prasad.htm. (accessed 20 June 2005)
- Prasad, O. Rajendra 'The Christian Message of Forgiveness as Seen in the Indian Films.' B.D. Thesis, United Theological College, 1981.
- Raghavan, V. 'Methods of Popular Religious Instruction in South India.' *The Journal of American Folklore* 71, no. 281 (1958): 336-344.
- Raheja, Dinesh, and Jitendra Kothari. *Indian Cinema, the Bollywood Saga*. New Delhi: Lustre Press; Roli Books, 2004.
- Rajadhyaksha, Ashish. 'The Phalke Era: Conflict of Traditional Form and Modern Technology.' *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, no. 14-15 (1987): 47-78.
- Rajadhyaksha, Ashish, Paul Willemen, British Film Institute, and National Film Archive of India. *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema*. New rev. ed. London: British Film Institute; Oxford University Press, 1999.

- Rajadhyaksha, Ashish. 'Viewership and Democracy in the Cinema.' In *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*, edited by Ravi S. Vasudevan, 267-296. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Ramsden, John. *The Dam Busters*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2003.
- Rao, Velcheru Narayana, ed. *Anthology of Telugu Poetry*. London: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Raskin, Richard. *A Child at Gunpoint: A Case Study in the Life of a Photo*. Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 2004.
- Ray, Rabindra. *The Naxalites and Their Ideology*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Ray, Satyajit. *Our Films, Their Films*. New York: Hyperion Books, 1994.
- Reinhartz, Adele. *Scripture on the Silver Screen*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003.
- _____. *Jesus of Hollywood*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Richison, Grant R. 'Biblical Rationale for Translating the Jesus Film for Small Tribes.' Campus Crusade for Christ, International, Document in the hand of the author, 2004.
- Riley, Robin. *Film, Faith, and Cultural Conflict: The Case of Martin Scorsese's The Last Temptation of Christ*. Westport, Conn. and London: Praeger, 2003.
- Robbins, Joel. 'Anthropology and Theology: An Awkward Relationship?' *Anthropological Quarterly* 79, no. 2 (2006): 285-294.
- Roberge, Gaston. *Chitra Bani: A Book on Film Appreciation*. Calcutta: Chitra Bani, 1974.
- _____. *Another Cinema for Another Society*. Calcutta: Seagull, 1985.
- _____. *Satyajit Ray: Essays (1970-2005)*. New Delhi: Manohar, 2007.
- Rothenbuhler, Eric W., and Mihai Coman. *Media Anthropology*. Thousand Oaks, Calif. and London: Sage, 2005.
- Ruby, Jay. 'Visual Anthropology.' In *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology*, ed. David Levinson and Melvin Ember, 4, 1345-1351. New York: Henry Holt, 1996.

- Sathavahana, Sri, 'Vijaychander, Born to Perform Jesus', [www.ilovehyd.com](http://www.ilovehyd.com/interviews/interviews-vijaychander-born-to-perform-jesus.html)
<http://www.ilovehyd.com/interviews/interviews-vijaychander-born-to-perform-jesus.html> (accessed 12 May 2005).
- Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1993.
- Sayers, Dorothy L. *The Man Born to Be King: A Play-Cycle on the Life of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*. London: Gollancz, 1943.
- Schechner, Richard. 'Rasaesthetics.' *The Drama Review* 45, no. 3 (2001): 27-50.
- Schillaci, Peter P. *Movies and Morals*. Notre Dame, IN: Fides, 1968.
- Schouten, Jan Peter. *Jesus as Guru: The Image of Christ among Hindus and Christians in India*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008.
- Schrader, Paul. *Transcendental Style in Film*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1972.
- _____. 'The Transcendental Style on Film (1972).' In *The Religion and Film Reader*, ed. Jolyon Mitchell and S. Brent Plate, 176-182. New York and London: Routledge, 2007.
- 'Screen Play Writer and Co-Director of *Karunamayudu*, C. Coelho Passes Away, Accessed 03 Jan, 2008 from www.ccbi.in/viewnews.php?action=viewmore&value=669
- Shafiq, Umsima. 'Forgotten Pioneer of Tamil Cinema.' *Gulf Times Features*, 20 January (2008), 8.
- Shah, Panna. *The Indian Film*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981.
- Singer, Milton. 'The Great Tradition in a Metropolitan Center: Madras.' *The Journal of American Folklore* 71, no. 281 (1958): 347-388.
- _____. 'The Radha-Krishna 'Bhajans' Of Madras City.' *History of Religions* 2, no. 2 (1963): 183-226.
- Sison, Antonio D. *Screening Schillebeeckx: Theology and Third Cinema in Dialogue*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Sitaram, K.N. 'Indian Dancing: With Special Reference to Its Hinduistic Aspects.' *Indian Arts and Letters* 9, no. 1 (1935): 32-59.
- Sivananda, Sri Swami. *Temples in India*. Tehri-Garhwal, Uttar Pradesh: The Divine Life Society, 1957. <http://www.rsl.ukans.edu/~pkanagar/divine/> (accessed 05 Dec, 2008).

- Skinner, James M. *The Cross and the Cinema: The Legion of Decency and the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures, 1933-1970*. Westport, Conn. and London: Praeger, 1993.
- Smith, David. *The Dance of Siva: Religion, Art and Poetry in South India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Smith, H. Daniel. 'The Effects Of 'God Posters' On Hindus and Their Devotional Traditions.' In *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia*, ed. Lawrence A. Babb and Susan Snow Wadley, 24-50. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- Sogaard, Viggo B. 'Media.' In *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau, 609-611. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000.
- Spilka, Bernard. *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach*. 3rd ed. New York: Guilford Press, 2003.
- Spitulnik, Debra. 'Anthropology and Mass Media.' *Annual Review of Anthropology* 22 (1993): 293-315.
- Srinivas, Lakshmi. 'Communicating Globalization in Bombay Cinema: Everyday Life, Imagination and the Persistence of the Local.' *Comparative American Studies* 3, no. 3 (2005): 319-344.
- Staiger, Janet. *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema*. Princeton and Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- _____. *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception*. London and New York: New York University Press, 2000.
- Stanley, Brian. *The Bible and the Flag*. Leicester: Apollos, 1990.
- _____, ed. *Missions, Nationalism, and the End of Empire*. Edited by R.E. Frykenberg and Brian Stanley. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003.
- Steffen, T. 'Don't Show the Jesus Film.' *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (1993): 272-275.
- Stern, Richard C., Clayton N. Jefford, and Guerric DeBona, *Savior on the Silver Screen*. New York: Paulist, 1999.
- Stone, Bryan. *Faith and Film: Theological Themes at the Cinema*. St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice, 2000.

- Sugirtharajah, R. S. 'Indian Cowboy, Hindu Christ.' *One World*, no. 49 (1979): 18-19.
- Sundarayya, Puchalapalli. *Telangana People's Armed Struggle, 1946-51*. New Delhi: National Book Centre, 1985.
- 'Swadeshi Moving Pictures.' *Continuum* 2, no. 1 (1988-1989): 51-73.
- 'Tanguturi Prakasam Pantulu' <http://amazingtelugus.blogspot.com/2005/06/tanguturi-prakasam-pantulu.html> (accessed 20 August 2007)
- Tatum, W. Barnes. *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years*. Santa Rosa, Calif.: Polebridge, 1997.
- Telford, William R. 'Jesus Christ Movie Star: The Depiction of Jesus in the Cinema.' In *Explorations in Theology and Film*, ed. Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz, 115-140. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997.
- _____. '"His blood be upon us, and our children": The Treatment of Jews and Judaism in the Christ Film.' In *Cinéma Divinité: Religion, Theology and the Bible in Film*, ed. Eric Christianson, Peter Francis, and William R. Telford, 266-288. London: SCM, 2005.
- _____. 'Through a Lens Darkly: Critical Approaches to Theology and Film.' In *Cinéma Divinité: Religion, Theology and the Bible in Film*, ed. Eric Christianson, Peter Francis, and William R. Telford, 15-43. London: SCM, 2005.
- _____. 'The Two Faces of Betrayal: The Characterization of Peter and Judas in the Biblical Epic or Christ Film.' In *Cinéma Divinité: Religion, Theology and the Bible in Film*, ed. Eric Christianson, Peter Francis, and William R. Telford, 214-235. London: SCM, 2005.
- Thangaraj, M. Thomas. *The Crucified Guru: An Experiment in Cross-Cultural Christology*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994.
- Thirumali, Inukonda. *Against Dora and Nizam: People's Movement in Telangana, 1939-1948*. New Delhi: Kanishka, 2003.
- '"This Must Be True".' In *The Global Villager*, edited by Dayspring International, Fall 2004, 4. Virginia Beach, VA: Dayspring International, 2004.
- Thomas, M. M. *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*. London: SCM Press, 1969.
- Thomas, Sham P., and Jolyon Mitchell. 'Understanding Television and Christianity in Marthoma Homes, South India.' *Studies in World Christianity* 11, no. 1 (2005): 29-48.

- _____. 'Prime Time and Prayer Time: Television, Religion and the Practices of Everyday Life of Marthoma Christians in Kerala, India.' Unpublished dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 2005.
- Thoraval, Yves. *The Cinemas of India: 1896-2000*. Delhi: Macmillan India, 2000.
- Tillich, Paul. *The Protestant Era*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948.
- _____. *Theology of Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969.
- _____. 'Art and Ultimate Reality.' In *Art, Creativity and the Sacred*, ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, 219-235. New York: Continuum, 1995.
- Torgovnik, Jonathan. *Bollywood Dreams: An Exploration of the Motion Picture Industry and Its Culture in India*. London and New York: Phaidon, 2003.
- Tozer, A.W. 'The Menace of the Religious Movie.' c. 1950s.
- Vaasanthi. *Cut-Outs, Caste and Cine Stars*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2006.
- Valicha, Kishore. *The Moving Image: A Study of Indian Cinema*. Bombay: Orient Longman, 1988.
- Vasudevan, Ravi. *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- _____. 'Devotional Transformation: Miracles, Mechanical Artifice, and Spectatorship in Indian Cinema.' *Postscripts* 1.2/1.3 (2005): 237-257.
- Veritas. 'We've Always Borrowed from Abroad.' *Filmfare* (Dec 23 - Jan 15 1978), 11-13.
- Vorgrimler, Herbert. *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*. Vol. 1. London: Burns and Oates; Herder and Herder, 1967.
- Wall, James M. 'Biblical Spectaculars and Secular Man.' In *Celluloid and Symbols*, ed. John Charles Cooper and Carl Skrade, 51-60. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970.
- Waller, Gregory A. *Moviegoing in America: A Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2002.
- _____. 'Robert Southard and the History of Traveling Film Exhibition.' *Film Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2003-2004): 2-14.
- Walls, Andrew F. *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*. Maryknoll, N.Y. and Edinburgh: Orbis Books; T&T Clark, 1996.

- Walsh, Frank. *Sin and Censorship*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996.
- Walsh, Richard. *Reading the Gospels in the Dark*. Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity, 2003.
- _____. 'Barabbas Rewrites the Cross: Parody or Parable?' In *Images of the Word: Hollywood's Bible and Beyond*, ed. David Shepherd, 113-129. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008.
- Webster, John C. B. *Religion and Dalit Liberation: An Examination of Perspectives*. New Delhi: Manohar, 1999.
- Wessels, Anton. *Images of Jesus: How Jesus Is Perceived and Portrayed in Non-European Cultures*. London: SCM Press, 1986.
- 'What's Cultural Relevance Got to Do with It?'. In *The Global Villager*, 8. Virginia Beach, VA: Dayspring International, 2004.
- 'What's Cultural Relevance Got to Do with It?' *The Global Villager* (2004): 8.
- Wilfred, Felix. *On the Banks of Ganges*. Delhi: ISPCK, 2002.
- Williams, Raymond. *Culture*. London: Fontana, 1981.
- Wingate, Andrew. 'Indian Christianity.' In *Jesus in History, Thought, and Culture: An Encyclopedia*, edited by J. L. Houlden, 1, 392-398. Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2003.
- Wright, Melanie J. *Religion and Film*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2006.
- Wright, N. T. *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Christian Origins and the Question of God. Vol. 2. London: SPCK, 1996.
- Ziolkowski, Theodore. *Fictional Transfigurations of Jesus*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972.
- Zwick, Reinhold. 'The Problem of Evil in Contemporary Film.' In *New Image of Religious Film*, ed. John R. May, 72-91. Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1997.

FILMOGRAPHY

- Arcand, Denys. *Jesus of Montreal* (1988) DVD. Radlett: Arrow Films, 2003.
- Attenborough, Richard. *Gandhi* (1982) DVD. 190 min. Sony Pictures, 2001.
- Bhimsingh, A. *Karunamayudu* (1978; Telugu) VCD. Volga Videos, 2003.
- Bhimsingh, A. *Daya Sagar* (1985; reissue of *Karunamayudu* in Hindi) DVD.
- Chander, Vijay. *Dayamayudu* (1987; Telugu) VCD. Volga Videos.
- DeMille, Cecil B. *The King of Kings* (1927). DVD. 267 min. Criterion Collection, 2004.
- Fleischer, Richard. *Barabbas* (1962) DVD. 137 min. Sony Pictures, 2002.
- Gibson, Mel. *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) DVD. 127 min. 20th Century Fox, 2004.
- Goodsmith, Martin. *Jesus Christ: Movie Star* (1992) 60 min. UK, 1992.
- Greene, David. *Godspell* (1973) DVD. 103 min. Sony, 2000.
- Jewison, Norman. *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) DVD. 108 min. Universal Pictures Video, 2004.
- Krish, John and Peter Sykes. *Jesus* (1979) VHS 129 min. 1979.
- Olcott, Sidney. *From the Manger to the Cross* (1913) 115 min. Image Entertainment, 2003.
- Pasolini, Pier Paolo. *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964) DVD. 127 min. London: Tartan Video, 2002.
- Ramakrishna, Kodi. *Piliste Palukutha* (2003) VCD. Volga Videos, 2003.
- Ray, Nicholas, Dir. *King of Kings* (1961) DVD. 171 min. California: Time Warner, 2003.
- Reddy, P. *Shanti Sandesham* (2004) DVD. Volga Videos, 2004.
- Saville, Philip. *Gospel of John* (2003) DVD. 181 min. Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2005.

Scorcese, Martin. *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) DVD. London: Universal, 2003.

Stevens, George. *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) DVD. 199 min. MGM Home Entertainment, 2004.

Thomas. P.A. *Jesus* (1973; Tamil) DVD. Personal copy held by author.

Wheeler, Rory. *The Passion: Films, Faith and Fury*. 101 min. UK, 2006.

William Wyler. *Ben-Hur* (1959) DVD. 212 min. Warner Home Video, 2004.

Young, Roger. *Jesus* (2000) DVD. 174 min. Lions Gate, 2000.

Zeffirelli, Franco. *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977) DVD. 371 min. Lions Gate, 2001.